

Nelson mandela's transformation of the african national congress

[People](#), [Nelson Mandela](#)



I. Introduction " During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. 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 live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die. (Denenberg 83-85)" These were Nelson Mandela's last words before being sentenced to life imprisonment for recruiting and training for the purpose of sabotage and violent revolution. As a result of love and dedication to both his people and nation, the ideal that Mandela expresses has become reality. Through his leadership, Nelson Mandela transformed the African National Congress [ANC] from a resistance group to a legitimate alternative to the ruling government of South Africa. This paper will examine the actions taken by Mandela to transform the ANC into an agent for change and for the eventual eradication of apartheid. Evidence will be introduced to support the contention that, without Mandela, the ANC would not have taken the steps necessary to bring about meaningful political changes in South Africa.

II. The ANC Before Mandela In an attempt to describe Nelson Mandela's transformation of the ANC, one must include a description of the ANC prior to Mandela's involvement. Dr. Pixley Ka Izaka Seme, a young Zulu relative of the Swazi royal family, developed the African National Congress. While studying at Columbia and Oxford Universities, Seme's aspirations were focused on how to rebuild the Zulu nation. He spoke of hopes for African liberation, " Already I seem to see her chains dissolve, her desert plains red with harvest, her Abyssinia and her Zululand the seats of science and religion... (Holland 39)"

But upon his return to Johannesburg from London in 1910, he was shocked by the conditions under which Africans lived and worked. He planned to establish a legal practice, but soon saw how few opportunities were available to him as a black lawyer. His voice was hardly heard in the magistrate's courts and his evidence was rarely accepted. Policemen stopped him at corners demanding to see his pass and tax receipt (" How Congress Began"). These experiences enraged Seme, and caused him to put aside his dreams of rebuilding the Zulu nation aside. He saw the treatment of blacks in their own land and developed a new goal, to unite blacks in defense of their rights (Holland 39). He began with a meeting among three lawyers, from different tribal origins, proposing the idea that since all Africans of all tribes were the victims of such horrific treatment, unity of the tribes would be an absolute necessity. The lawyers agreed, and Seme then decided to call a conference of all black leaders. Several hundred leaders from all four provinces answered his call enthusiastically. With some dressed in Edwardian frock coats and others in leopard skins, they met in a dilapidated shed in Bloemfontein, two years after the establishment of the Union of South Africa. Journalists and builders, clergymen and clerks, businessmen and teachers met " to devise ways and means of forming our nation union for the purpose of creating nation unity and defending our rights and privileges," as said by Dr. Seme himself. The end of the conference resulted in the formation of the South African National Conference, later called the African National Congress. A Zulu headmaster from Natal, Dr. John Dube, was elected president, Solomon Plaatje, the first black to write a novel in English, was Secretary, and Dr. Seme was treasurer. Their focus was on removing racial

discrimination in parliament, public administration, schools and the factories of their native land. South Africa. Their method of actions would be similar to those encouraged by Mahatma Ghandi, 'peaceful propaganda' in their first attempt, then 'passive action' or 'continued movement' would follow (Holland 40-41). It wouldn't be until 1944, thirty-two years after its formation, that Mandela would join the ANC. III. Enter Mandela Walter Sisul, a real estate agent from Transkei like Mandela, invited him and his friend Oliver Tambo to an ANC meeting (Otfinoski 29-30). The two thoroughly enjoyed what they heard and quickly joined the organization as members. But, by the time of Mandela's enrollment, the ANC had suffered a decline. The once energetic and enthusiastic demands for change its members had embraced over thirty years ago were now replaced with less relevant ones. Many of its younger members grew tired of the old leadership's course of action, pointing out the injustices of apartheid so that even whites would eventually understand its evil, But, the younger members were tired of waiting for whites to help. According to Barry Denenberg, "The ANC had grown weak. The leadership had become cautious, and had compromised when they should have confronted." These were the opinions of many of its younger members, Mandela included. They felt that more forceful steps were necessary to achieve their goals. Their influence would change the entire political philosophy of the ANC. By 1944, Mandela and sixty-two others were the founders of a separate division of the ANC, the Youth League of the African National Congress. Its development would satisfy those who longed for change along with those who wanted to work within the ANC. Long discussions began to define their political philosophy. The belief of some was

that Africa belonged to black people and that white should leave. They, not the whites, were the owners of a land that had been divided and conquered by white European colonists. But Mandela opposed this approach. He believed that South Africa should become a nation without any kind of racism, and that all racial groups were there to stay. The League decided that whites were neither enemy nor friend. Blacks had to take responsibility for their own future, and this was what mattered most. But the Youth League had to take action soon. South Africa's industry was growing and foreign investment increasing, causing the whites to become richer. Hundreds of thousands of Africans were being crammed into overcrowded townships, suffering unemployment, ill health, forced removal from their homes, and constant police pressure. The blacks were becoming poorer and suffering from deteriorating living conditions, they were becoming more aggressive. The Youth League wanted to involve as many people as they could in their effort for change. Their old ways of petitions and polite letters of protests would no longer suffice. The African Nation Congress had to become more militant. There would now be boycotts, mass demonstrations, and other new methods of nonviolent, but outside the legal framework, resistance. When Mandela first joined the Youth League he strongly participated in establishing its philosophy. But he rarely spoke at its larger meetings and conferences. This changed, three years later, when he was elected secretary. He was becoming known not only to the members, but to the public as well, and in 1951 he was elected president of the Youth League (Denenberg 37-42). IV. Mandela's Plan of Action In 1952, the African National Congress started acting. They organized South Africa's first nationwide protest against

apartheid. Just a year before these protests, Mandela and others decided it was time to confront the government. A letter was written to Prime Minister Malan. In it, the ANC explained that they had been protesting for many years, but their protests were met with no response. The government did not react to a single request and their only reactions were increased persecution of black South Africans. They gave the government an ultimatum, unless they repealed the six unjust laws against blacks, by April 6, 1952, their campaign of defiance would begin. The government replied with a no, they would not repeal the laws and any rebellious activities would be dealt with quickly and harshly. So the Defiance Campaign began and Mandela was given the responsibility of all volunteer activity including coordinating ANC branches and raising funds (Denenberg 43-44). He started touring every part of South Africa to recruit volunteers immediately. On street corners in Durban and Johannesburg he preached his message of hope to the African masses. In dilapidated homes in black townships of Soweto and New Brighton, wherever they were welcome, Mandela would patiently explain his plan. Daily, South Africans were on the receiving end of violence for countless years, but contrary to this, Mandela would tell his listeners that they must be willing to accept suffering without retaliation. He promised that although nonviolence would require tremendous determination and courage in the face of the violent frustration by the police, it would bring an end to their oppression (Schlesinger 37). Mandela explained that nonviolence often showed more courage than violence. As a foreshadowing to the sit-ins that occurred during the American civil rights movement, they set out peacefully to use white-only entrances in railway stations, waiting rooms, and post

offices. Curfews were ignored, areas that were forbidden were trespassed, and they refused to present their passbooks. Thousands were sent to jail in their successful demonstration of orderly, mass, passive resistance (Denenberg 45). Unfortunately, the Defiance Campaign failed in its attempt to force the South African government to repeal any of its laws. The government did the opposite and added two more laws that made it illegal to encourage blacks to resist the law. The simple holding of a meeting was outlawed. Riots began and the campaign soon lost momentum and ended. Mandela and practically all other organizers of the campaign, were banned. Their banishment prevented them from attending any gathering specified by the government, writing for any publication, belonging to any organization specified by the government, and many other specifications (Denenberg 46-47). But, as a result of Mandela's passionate words while recruiting, he inspired courage and confidence in all he encountered. The ANC transformed itself into a mass movement, growing from 20, 000 members to 100, 000 by the end of 1952. Although ineffective in achieving their major goals, the campaign radicalized thousands of Africans and was an astonishing triumphant display of the potential power of the African masses. A power that would be shown remarkably upon the release of Nelson Mandela thirty years later (Schlesinger 39). By 1952, Mandela was elected president of the Transvaal ANC, and, three years later approved the Freedom Charter. The Congress of the People, which included all groups opposing apartheid; the ANC, the Indian Congress, the Congress of Trade Unions, and the Congress of Democrats, developed the Freedom Charter. They approached people in cities and villages all over South Africa, asking them what they would do if

they could make the laws, or how they would make South Africa a more tolerant society. A committee looked over all of the responses, resulting in a draft of the Freedom Charter. This document was sent to be approved by Mandela and a group of others (Denenberg 50). The document was intended to become a political testimony of the liberation movement in South Africa. As the Afrikaners consistently declared, it was not a blueprint for a socialist state. Rather, it was the blueprint of what many envisioned as an end to all apartheid legislation and the creation of a democratic society that offered political and human rights for all. The end result was now ready to be presented to the Congress of the People. On June 26th, 1955 close to 3, 000 delegates and hundreds of spectators gathered at a field a short distance from Johannesburg to begin the Congress, This meeting was the first time such a representative group of races had ever publicly stressed their opposition to apartheid (Schlesinger 43-44). As a result of Mandela's banning, he was disguised, watching the gathering from a distance. The process of ratifying the Freedom Charter had begun. It was read aloud in English, Xhosa, and Zulu. Each paragraph of the charter was debated with the delegates speaking for the people they represented. The first lines began with, " We the people of South Africa declare for all our country and the world to know, that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people." Each section was adopted by the applause of the crowd. The government was invited to attend the gathering, and on the second day, interrupted the festive occasion by sending police to seize every document in sight. They mounted the platform and confiscated every paper,

document and banner they could find. No one was allowed to leave, all entrances were blocked, and all of the delegates were searched and questioned late into the night. On December 5th, 1956, six months following the raiding of the Congress, 156 people were arrested in the early hours of the night. Nearly the entire ANC leadership, including Mandela, was taken into custody. The government claimed these people were members of a nationwide conspiracy, inspired by international communism, to overthrow the state by violence. Mandela described the charter as " a revolutionary document precisely because the changes it envisages cannot be won without breaking up the economic and political setup of present South Africa (Schlesinger 44-45)." But, the government labeled the Freedom Charter as a blueprint for violent revolution and those responsible for it were guilty of it treason. The trial lasted for four and a half years until 1961. Not only were the defendants on trial, but also the Freedom Charter itself was on trial. But the state's presentation of its case was uncoordinated and the testimonies of witnesses were often unconvincing. Mandela's long testimony, measuring four hundred and forty-one pages of court record, showed pure eloquence. His explanation of the ANC policies along with his composure and good humor brought him and the organization worldwide respect. In March of 1961, a verdict was reached. The judge stated that the state failed to prove their case, and all 156 had been acquitted and were discharged (Denenberg 55-57). The countless struggles during the 1950's and 60's brought blacks and whites together in the fight for justice and democracy. The Congress of the People was a perfect example of the ANC's policy regarding non-racialism. The Freedom Charter stated that South Africa belonged to all who

lived in it. But not all the members of the ANC agreed with the non-racialism philosophy. There was a small minority inside the ANC who opposed the Freedom Charter and the ANC's growing multiracial population. In 1959, these people broke away from the ANC and formed their own group, the Pan Africanist Congress. Although they disagreed on non-racialism, the ANC and PAC were both against the pass laws in South Africa that required nonwhite South Africans to carry documents approving their movement in white-only areas. A campaign as developed by both organizations in 1960. On March 21st, the PAC's campaign began. People left their passes at home and gathered at police stations in Sharpville in the Vaal, and other cities near Cape Town. In Sharpville, police opened fire on the unarmed, peaceful crowd, killing 69 and wounding 186. The government banned the ANC and PAC, marking the end of a decade of peaceful protesting. (Mzabalazo).

Mandela believed there came the time in any nation when they must make the decision to submit or fight. It was then Black South Africa's time to fight. The slaying of peaceful protestors, and banning of the ANC clearly showed that peaceful protesting alone would not cause a change in the government. With this in mind, Mandela, Walter Sisulu, and the head of the Communist Party, Joe Slovo, developed a program of carefully controlled sabotage. It would be a separate, armed wing of the ANC, called Umkhonto we Sizwe, or Spear of the Nation. Their targets would be power plants, communication lines, and other industrial sites all-critical to the country's economy. Their goal was to place a sever drain on the economy, affecting the foreign capital and foreign trade. Overall, they hoped to convince voters to withdraw their support of apartheid. Mandela made it clear, however, that they were only to

strike when the sites were empty. There could be no loss of life (Otfinoski 60). Their first attack was in December of 1961. They struck government buildings in three South African cities. Over the next three years, Spear of the Nation recruited members and sent them out of the country to become trained in work with explosives. The now banned ANC had clearly changed its tactics. With Mandela working underground, he was becoming a legend. He took elaborate precautions in an attempt of not getting caught. He developed many disguises, but after eighteen months of being a fugitive, Mandela was captured. He was sentenced to five years in prison with hard labor. In the summer of 1963, security police arrested Walter Sisulu and eight others; they also confiscated hundreds of documents and maps. The captured evidence gave the government the proof they needed and in October of 1963, the Rivonia Trial began. Nelson Mandela, who was already incarcerated, was again on trial. But this time, he was on trial for his life. The government took five months to present their case, and Mandela pleaded not guilty to charges of sabotage, high treason, and conspiring to overthrow the government. He answered each charge against him with calm eloquence, but the judge was not moved by his stirring words. (Denenberg 75-79). Mandela and his six colleagues were sentenced to life imprisonment, a sentence that they would not fully serve. Although its major leaders were imprisoned, the ANC would continue to have its influence on the people of South Africa. Over the next three decades more and more strikes would occur. During a demonstration in Soweto black students were opposing a new law that required Afrikaans, what they thought to be the racist language of their white masters, to be taught in black schools. Teargas grenades were

thrown, and the students reacted with violence. Two demonstrators lay dead and a dozen were wounded. By the 1980's more attention would be focused on the one man many blacks saw as the only hope for South Africa's future. "Free Mandela" campaigns were launched at Witswatersand University, Mandela's alma mater. Within two months 58, 000 South Africans, black and white, signed a petition calling for the release of Mandela and all of the political prisoners in South Africa (Otfinoski 83-86). By the late 1980's, progress in the fight against apartheid had actually begun. In 1989 F. W. de Klerk was elected prime minister of South Africa. He began the process of reconciliation with the black community by releasing Walter Sisulu and other prisoners, with the exception of Nelson Mandela. On December 13th, de Klerk and Mandela met in the first of a series of meetings designed to negotiate a new constitution that would replace apartheid with a true democracy. De Klerk announced the legality of the ANC on February 2nd, 1990, and Nelson Mandela was released from prison nine days later. Upon his release, he continued to work to abolish the apartheid laws. By May 2, 1990, the now legalized ANC met with government representatives to negotiate plans for a new constitution. June 1991, F. W. de Klerk called for a repeal of the major laws of apartheid, including the Population Registration Act of 1950, this divided all of South Africa according to race. The following month, the ANC held it's first national conference since it's banning in 1960. Mandela was elected, unopposed, as president of the ANC (Otfinoski 98-115). As a result of his skillful negotiations with de Klerk, Nelson Mandela has shown to be a master politician. From an early age he was looked upon as a respectable leader and others admired his ability to effortlessly make others

listen to his words. With these abilities Mandela was able to lead others as shown through his involvement with the Youth League, Freedom Charter, Defiance Campaign, and Umkhonto we Sizwe. Through each of these occurrences, the ANC was slowly undergoing a dramatic change. As evident throughout this paper, Nelson Mandela played an indispensable role in all of these occurrences. He has watched the ideal that he once dreamed of become actuality. Without his authority and eloquent words, perhaps their influence would not have been as great on the government. Forevermore, he will be compared to the likes of Martin Luther King Jr. and Mohandas Ghandi. Eternally, he will be acknowledged as the one who brought a nation to unity, ultimately abolishing apartheid. From prisoner to the 1st president of South Africa, this is the perfect testament of Nelson Mandela's impact on the South African nation. As described by his sister, Mandela is " a man who does not belong to the Mandela's, but he is a man who belongs to the nation, for it is in his nature that he was meant to embrace an entire nation."