



Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela: The iconic freedom fighter

On Thursday, 5 December 2013, South Africa and the world received the shocking news that the iconic freedom fighter and founding father of the democratic republic of South Africa, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, was no longer with us. He had passed away peacefully after over 95 years on earth, 27 of which he was incarcerated on Robben Island near Cape Town. We were told that Madiba, as he was fondly called, inherited the name “Nelson” from Miss Mdingane, his primary school teacher in Qunu, who gave every student an English name. His Xhosa name, **Rolihlahla**, literally means “pulling the branch of a tree”, but its colloquial meaning is “troublemaker”. Madiba fought the apartheid system before and during his incarceration, as well as after his release from prison. This was exemplified during his inaugural address on 10 May 1994, which contained one of his famous quotations, which was: “Never, never, and never again, shall it be that this beautiful land will experience the oppression of one by another”.

As we all stood in the various long queues to participate in South Africa’s first democratic elections, held between 26 and 28 April 1994, it was like a dream come true for many South Africans who had never had the opportunity to vote for a government of their choice. The tears of joy were made possible by the sacrifices of many freedom fighters who were disenfranchised by the apartheid system, including Madiba, who became the symbol of the struggle for a just and democratic South Africa. Mandela’s presidency was characterised by the successful negotiation of a new constitution: a start on the massive task of restructuring the civil service and attempts to redirect national priorities to address the results of apartheid, as well as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, set up primarily to investigate the wrongs of the past.¹

Nelson Mandela was the first:

- Black elected president in a democratic South Africa.
- Person for whom the United Nations designated an international day to honour his birthday: 18 July 2013.

- Past president who made it possible for South Africa to win the bid to host the first (2010) **Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA)** World Cup on the African continent.
- Deceased president to have over 100 current and past state presidents attend his memorial service.

Madiba was a revolutionary leader, a visionary, a democrat and international political leader, who exercised his influence and ethical leadership with humility and respect for everyone. In addition, he was persistent in his resolve to fight all forms of discrimination, injustice and inequality.² Madiba made a strong resolve, first in his 1964 Rivonia trial defence statement, and again, repeated during the closing of his speech which he delivered in Cape Town on the day he was released from prison 27 years later on 11 February 1990: “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, with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for, and to see realised. But my Lord, if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die”.

Nelson Mandela fought the good fight against injustice and for the freedom which we all enjoy in South Africa. Let us all honour his legacy by striving for a better non-racial South Africa. He has completed his race of life and he is now resting in peace. Goodbye, our hero; goodbye, our liberator; goodbye, our iconic freedom fighter!

Prof Gboyega Ogunbanjo

Editor-in-chief: **South African Family Practice**

References

1. South African history: the death of apartheid. SouthAfrica.info [homepage on the Internet]. 2012. Available from: <http://www.southafrica.info/about/history/5211109.htm#ixzz2n0ZUTGEg>
2. Nelson Mandela biography. South African History Online [homepage on the Internet]. c2013. Available from: <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/nelson-rolihlahla-mandela>