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The law as a tool for change

Raised in the traditions of the Xhosa tribe, Nelson Mandela made the most of limited school opportunities for blacks. He became the first South African-educated black lawyer.



Jürgen Schuddeberg
As a crusading attorney Mandela first worked for change "within the system."

Non-violent confrontation

Mandela joined the Youth League of the African National Congress and led non-violent confrontations with the government during the 1950s. He was jailed for supporting the 1955 Freedom Charter.



AP/Wide World
Mandela pushed the ANC toward "non-violent confrontation." Here he burns his own pass to protest the hated pass laws.

Moving to violent action

After many years of peaceful protest, Mandela organized a wing of the ANC ("Umkonto we Sizwe" – "Spear of the Nation") which sabotaged government property and planned violent action. For that he was sentenced to life in prison in 1963.



AP/Wide World
After the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre, Mandela began to call for careful use of violence against the government.

"I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society... 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."

NELSON MANDELA, SPEECH AT SENTENCING, 1963

From prisoner to president

At his 1963 sentencing, Nelson Mandela spoke eloquently of his faith in democracy. During 27 years in prison, he emerged as the ANC's most respected voice.

Enduring brutal mistreatment, he never wavered in insisting that Apartheid must end, that government must include the black majority – and that the white minority must have a role in government, as well.

When Apartheid finally began to crumble, it would be Mandela who stepped forward to lead.



AP/Wide World



AP/Wide World

On February 11, 1990, Nelson Mandela took his first steps of freedom after over two decades in prison. Winnie Mandela, his wife and a tireless activist in her own right, stood at his side. As he raised his right fist in the victory salute of the ANC, people around the world cheered.

In his cell on Robben Island, Nelson Mandela had only a mat, a bedroll and two blankets. When he lay down to sleep, his head touched one wall, his feet the other.

He worked to keep physically and mentally strong. In the 1980s and early 1990s the government offered him release if he would call on South Africans to renounce violence against Apartheid.

He refused, sending a message to the people with his daughter Zinzi: "I cherish my freedom, but I care even more for your freedom."