

South Africa 20 years on from the release of Nelson Mandela

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20 years ago on 11 February Nelson Mandela walked free after 27 years of imprisonment. He is the most inspiring person of the age. He has stood for, fought for and suffered for democracy, rights and justice. He has demonstrated remarkable qualities of leadership and personifies reconciliation.

Since Nelson Mandela walked free, as result of domestic and international pressure on the apartheid regime, much has changed throughout the southern African region:

- Namibia gained its independence in 1990
- The war in Mozambique ceased in 1992 and the country has been at peace since.
- The authoritarian rule of Hastings Banda in Malawi was ended following a referendum in 1993 and elections were held in 1994.
- The war in Angola ceased in 2002.

What has changed in South Africa since then?

Successes

1. Democracy: South Africa has held four democratic elections. The period of negotiation from 1990 right up to the 1994 elections was fraught with violence involving both the Inkatha Freedom Party and the white far right. On the eve of the 1994 elections many commentators predicted South Africa would slide further into chaos and violence. However, after its first exemplary freedom election, the country has held three further national elections that have been internationally recognised as free and fair, as well as provincial and local elections. There has been a complete end to political violence.

2. Pride: Most South Africans, black and white, are proud to be South African. They believe their country has achieved something significant yet intangible – the recognition of each other, of rights and needs and a functioning, vibrant democracy. This is a key point. Development does involve meeting basic needs, food, shelter, water, but it is much than that – it is about rights and dignity, recognising diversity and that everyone is of equal worth and value. Apartheid denied this. What has been achieved in South Africa in terms of restoring the essential dignity of people is phenomenal.

3. Constitution: The Constitution of South Africa is now widely regarded as one the best in the world in providing rights for its citizens. Its Bill of Rights prohibits discrimination on grounds that include race, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, disability and belief. South Africa is one of few states internationally to recognise gay marriage.

4. Position of women: In Parliament and provincial legislatures women occupy 33 per cent of seats, more than in the UK and many other Western democracies.

5. Housing: South Africa has gone a long way towards catching up with the huge backlog of housing need inherited from the apartheid regime. More than 2.3 million new homes have been built and tens of thousands of people now have security of tenure. However, there is still a major need for more decent housing in areas where people want to live.

6. Water and sanitation: By 2007 85 per cent of the population had access to safe water – up from 59 per cent in 1994. 71 per cent now have decent sanitation – up from 50 per cent in 1994.

7. Electricity: 4.2 million homes were electrified between 1994 and 2006 and 80 per cent of homes now have electricity.

8. Health: Healthcare is free to children under six, pregnant women and people with disabilities. Free school meals are provided to nearly six million children. Immunisation programmes are widespread, reaching 90 per cent of the population and as a consequence polio has been eliminated.

9. Education: There have been big increases in spending on education. No public school can refuse admission on the grounds a parent cannot pay the fees and 40 per cent of schools do not charge fees. The number of overcrowded schools has fallen from 51 per cent to 24 in the last 10 years.

10. Pensions and benefits systems: South Africa provides a pension system for its citizens and increasingly a benefits system for those in need. Pensions have been shown to have the greatest potential for reducing poverty amongst the elderly. 12 million South Africans now receive social grants.

11. Macro-economic stability: South Africa has had the longest period of economic growth in its history. It has not had to go the IMF or World Bank for loans, as so much of Africa has had to do.

12. South Africa in Africa: South Africa is now a key player in the African Union and SADC. It has led the call for leadership from Africa to deal with Africa's problems. The Pan-African parliament is located in South Africa. Former President Thabo Mbeki led the setting up of NEPAD (New Partnership for African Development) and the African peer review process. It has been a force for peace on the continent. Under Nelson Mandela's leadership, it mediated in the conflict in Burundi. Former President Thabo Mbeki is currently trying to mediate in Darfur.

14. South Africa in the world: South Africa is a member of the G20 group and a leader of the developing world. It has played a leading role in defending the interests of developing countries in international trade negotiations and joined with China, India and Brazil to develop a common platform on climate change. It has also played a positive role on the conflict in the Middle East. It provides hope and inspiration across Africa and the world.

This list is impressive and is a clear demonstration that the political changes have led to improvements in the quality of life of many South Africans. But apartheid has left a huge legacy. The above figures and the challenges below show just how unequal and afflicted by dire poverty South Africa was pre-1994, how much was needed and how much still needs to be done.

Challenges

1. Poverty and unemployment: National unemployment is 25 per cent, according to official government figures; however the widely accepted figure is 40 per cent. A key challenge is how to ensure that macroeconomic stability and economic growth translates into jobs. There is also a big need for more training and skills.

2. Inequality: South Africa is still one of the most unequal societies in the world. There is a developing black middle class and a small, but growing, rich black elite as well as the long existing rich white elite. There are still two South Africas: there is still a divide by race (70 per cent of management posts are held by whites, approx 12 per cent of the population) and gender. But there is also a divide of class. One South Africa has employment of skilled people, who are globally competitive, reasonably educated, informed; the other South Africa is of people with low education and skill level, unemployed or in the informal sector and marginalised.

3. HIV/AIDS: South Africa has the fourth highest rate of HIV in the world. A 2008 national survey estimated that 16.9 per cent of people aged 15–49 years old were HIV-positive. It now has a proactive national strategy and programme providing free ARVs (anti-retroviral drugs) to all who need them. As a result HIV prevalence appears to have stabilised, and may even be declining slightly. Among teenage girls, the rate fell from 16.1 per cent in 2004 to 12.9 per cent in 2007. This follows a disastrous lack of leadership on the issue under the Presidency of Thabo Mbeki, including mixed messages about the cause of AIDS. Since stepping down as President, Nelson Mandela has been forthright on the urgency of the need to tackle AIDS and set up 46664 (his prison number) as his global HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention campaign.

4. Crime: South Africa suffers from high rates of crime, especially in its major cities. Most victims of crime live in poverty. Crime is not a recent phenomenon. The apartheid system was one of control and coercion. For some with little prospect of employment in an unequal society crime is an obvious option.

5. Education: This is still in transition. South Africa has had to build a new education system geared to all and not the few, which prepares and skills its youth for the 21st century. This was not going to happen overnight and it hasn't. The challenge remains of achieving good quality education for all.

6. Capacity: Service delivery remains a challenge, especially in the rural areas. Since 1994 South Africa has been trying to meet the needs of all its population, not just 12 to 15 per cent. This involves resources and policies, but also the capacity to deliver. This has required building a new system of government. It requires people with the education, knowledge, skills, information to ensure policies translate into effective action on the ground. These constraints have clearly hindered service delivery.

7. Immigration: South Africa is a magnet for people from all over Africa and for refugees, especially from Zimbabwe. An estimated eight million people have moved to South Africa since the early 1990s. The apartheid government imposed strict controls on entry – these broke down from around 1992/93. There is considerable resentment of immigrants, who are perceived to take jobs from South Africans, and there have been serious cases of 'xenophobic violence'. Such incidents cannot be condoned, but there should also be recognition that most South Africans have not treated immigrants in this way.

9. Liberation movement to government: Some express concern that the African National Congress dominates South Africa politics. To some, the dominance of the ANC raises issues of the separation of state institutions from party ones. The ANC demonstrated robust internal democracy by changing its leadership at its Polakwane conference in 2007 and subsequently it recalled and replaced its nominee for President. It has demonstrated it is a dynamic and diverse party. It won nearly 66 per cent of the vote in 2009 in a free and fair election against competition from the revitalised Democratic Alliance (DA) and newly formed Congress of the People (COPE).

10. Zimbabwe: The South African government views Zimbabwe as largely a domestic issue of competition between political parties which descended into conflict. It has rejected military intervention or force and sanctions. It does not believe a solution can be imposed from the outside so has backed negotiations. It has on behalf of SADC mediated in Zimbabwe and this has led to the current Inclusive Government.

Summary

The release of Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners came about because of great pressure from within and outside of South Africa. His release signalled the recognition that there would have to be negotiation between the apartheid state and those who had long campaigned for liberation, freedom and democracy led by the ANC.

The ending of apartheid is one of the great achievements of our time. It involved millions around the world campaigning in solidarity. But it was never easy. People died, were jailed, beaten up, were forced into exile, countries neighbouring South Africa were invaded and destabilised. The apartheid state inflicted great damage to South Africa and on neighbouring countries.

But the challenge of the post apartheid era is just as great. The struggle was against apartheid. But it was also for democracy, freedom, rights, dignity, equality and development.

ACTSA was established as the successor organisation to the Anti-Apartheid Movement in 1994 to inform and involve people in Britain in support of the people of southern Africa as they seek to build democracy, attain rights and dignity, reduce poverty and achieve development and equality. Southern Africans say they want and need our support. Nelson Mandela has stated that people need to mobilise now against poverty and gross inequality as they did against apartheid. The struggle against apartheid was never easy and people who engaged in it did not receive universal praise and recognition. But it gave a clear focus. The focus today is more diffuse but the need is just as great. Ending apartheid is a great achievement, as was securing the release of Nelson Mandela and others, but it is only half the battle

What can you do?

There are many ways that you can get involved in campaigning on the key issues affecting South and southern Africa through ACTSA. Here are just some examples:

- Sign up to ACTSA as a member, and will receive regular information on our work and the latest news from the region.
- Sign up at www.actsa.org to receive our regular email bulletins and our monthly Zimbabwe Update
- Ask your trade union to affiliate to ACTSA
- Support our campaign actions – visit our website to see the latest key actions
- Find out more about our Dignity! Period. campaign which provides much needed sanitary products to the women of Zimbabwe
- Local authorities can work with Local Authorities Action for Southern Africa to encourage community and local activity

Nelson Mandela's release from prison 20 years ago was a major turning point in the campaign against apartheid, and a tribute to the hard work of all those who campaigned internationally for his release. On this special anniversary ACTSA would like to give thanks for his life and work so far and pay tribute to his great qualities of leadership which continues to inspire millions around the world.