



Complex World

The End of Apartheid South Africa: New Beginnings and Lingering Challenges

Historical Context

For nearly 50 years, South Africa was ruled by a system called apartheid, which legally separated people by race. Starting in 1948, the white minority government passed laws that gave white people more rights and power, while taking rights away from Black, Indian, and Coloured (mixed-race) South Africans. Black South Africans could not vote, own land in most areas, or attend the same schools or hospitals as white people. They were forced to live in separate areas and carry special passes to travel. Life under apartheid was harsh and unfair. Many South Africans fought back. The African National Congress (ANC) became a leading voice of resistance, and leaders like Nelson Mandela were arrested and imprisoned for speaking out. Mandela spent 27 years in prison for his role in fighting apartheid. He was arrested in 1962 for organizing strikes and leaving South Africa without permission. Mandela was later sentenced to life in prison for sabotage and plotting to overthrow the government. His long imprisonment became a powerful symbol of resistance to apartheid, the system of racial segregation and oppression in South Africa. Meanwhile, the world began to take notice. Countries around the globe placed sanctions on South Africa, calling for an end to apartheid. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the South African government faced growing pressure from within the country and around the world. In 1990, Nelson Mandela was released from prison. In 1994, South Africa held its first free election where all adults could vote, regardless of race. Nelson Mandela was elected as the country's first Black president. This election marked the official end of apartheid and was a moment of hope for many. After apartheid ended, South Africa tried to heal. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, led by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, gave victims and former government officials a chance to tell their stories. The goal was not revenge but truth and healing. Even though apartheid officially ended, many problems remain. Most land is still owned by white South Africans, and poverty continues to affect many Black communities. Access to good education, jobs, and healthcare is still unequal. Corruption and unemployment have also slowed progress. The end of apartheid brought freedom and a new beginning for South Africa. But the country still faces many challenges that were created by decades of injustice. Understanding this history helps us see both the victories of the past and the hard work that still lies ahead.

Connection to Habit

The story of the end of apartheid in South Africa is a clear example of how history is shaped by complexity, uncertainty, and many points of view. In the early 1990s, no one knew for sure how the country would move forward. Some feared violence, others hoped for peace. Leaders like Nelson Mandela had to make difficult decisions without knowing how they would turn out. By learning about this time, students can better understand that people in history lived with the same uncertainty we feel today. There were many different opinions and experiences from those who suffered under apartheid, to those who benefited from it, to those unsure of what change would bring. Recognizing these different perspectives helps us think more deeply about justice, progress, and how to move forward in our own complex world.

Discussion Questions

- What do you think the future felt like for South Africans in 1994 during the first democratic elections? How might their hopes or fears have differed depending on their background or experience?
- Why do you think Nelson Mandela chose reconciliation over revenge after the fall of apartheid? What might have been some risks or benefits of that decision?
- How might someone who grew up with privileges under apartheid view the changes after 1994 differently from someone who was oppressed by the system?
- Even though apartheid ended over 30 years ago, why do many of its effects still remain in South African society today?
- What are some of the biggest challenges that South Africa continues to face as a result of its apartheid past?
- What role should leaders play in helping a divided country heal? How do leaders like Nelson Mandela or Desmond Tutu demonstrate leadership in a complex world?
- What does the story of South Africa teach us about the challenges of creating a fair society after a long period of injustice? How might those lessons apply in our own country or community?

Suggested Activity

Materials Needed:

- Printed or digital of [Nelson Mandela's 1994 inaugural address](#)
- Notebook Paper

Step 1: Independent Reading [10 mins]

Distribute the speech. Students should read quietly, highlighting phrases that reflect:

- Awareness of uncertainty or challenge
- Appeals for unity across different groups
- Recognition of past injustices and hopes for healing

Step 2: Think-Pair-Share [15 mins]

Students consider the following prompts, first individually, then paired, then share with the class:

- What uncertainties did Mandela mention or acknowledge?
- Which groups or identities does he address?
- What tone does his speech convey? How does he balance hope and realism?

Step 3: Whole Class Discussion [15 mins]

Guide a class discussion using these questions:

- How does Mandela show he understands this is a complex and uncertain moment for South Africa?
- Why is it significant that he speaks to so many groups by name?
- How does this speech illustrate the idea that leadership involves hearing multiple perspectives?

Step 4: Reflection Exit Ticket [5-10 mins]

Students write a short response:

- Identify one sentence that shows Mandela accepting uncertainty or risk.
- Explain why acknowledging uncertainty is important in moments of national change.
- Reflect on how the Complex World habit of mind helps us understand both historical moments and our own lives.

Primary Source

Nelson Mandela's inauguration speech as President of South Africa

10 May 1994

Your Majesties
Your Highnesses
Distinguished Guests
Comrades and Friends

Today, all of us do, by our presence here, and by our celebrations in other parts of our country and the world, confer glory and hope to newborn liberty.

Out of the experience of and extraordinary human disaster that lasted too long, must be born a society of which all humanity will be proud.

Our daily deeds as ordinary South Africans must produce an actual South African reality that will reinforce humanity's belief in justice, strengthen its confidence in the nobility of the human soul and sustain all our hopes for glorious life for all.

All this we owe both to ourselves and to the peoples of the world who are so well represented here today.

To my compatriots, I have no hesitation in saying that each one of us is as intimately attached to the soil of this beautiful country as are the famous jacaranda trees of Pretoria and the mimosa trees of the bushveld.

Each time one of us touches the soil of this land, we feel a sense of personal renewal. The national mood changes as the seasons change.

We are moved by a sense of joy and exhilaration when the grass turns green and the flowers bloom. That spiritual and physical oneness we all share with this common homeland explains the depth of the pain we all carried in our hearts as we saw our country tear itself apart in a terrible conflict, and as we saw it spurned, outlawed and isolated by the peoples of the world, precisely because it has become the universal base of the pernicious ideology and practice of racism and racial oppression.

We, the people of South Africa, feel fulfilled that humanity has taken us back into its bosom, that we, who were outlaws no so long ago, have today been given the rare privilege to be host to the nations of the world on our own soil.

Primary Source

Nelson Mandela's inauguration speech as President of South Africa cont.

We thank all our distinguished international guests for having come to take possession people of our country of what is, after all, a common victory for justice, for peace, for human dignity. We trust that you will continue to stand by us as we tackle the challenges of building peace, prosperity, non-sexism, non-racialism and democracy.

We deeply appreciate the role that the masses of our people and their political mass democratic, religious, women, youth, business, traditional and other leaders have played to bring about this conclusion. Not least among them is my Second Deputy President, the Honourable F.W. de Klerk. We would also like to pay tribute to our security forces, in all their ranks, for the distinguished role they have played in securing our first democratic elections and the transition to democracy, from blood-thirsty forces which still refuse to see the light.

The time for the healing of the wounds has come.
The moment to bridge the chasms that divide us has come.
The time to build is upon us.

We have, at last, achieved our political emancipation. We pledge ourselves to liberate all our people from the continuing bondage of poverty, deprivation, suffering, gender and other discrimination. We succeeded to take our last steps to freedom in conditions of relative peace. We commit ourselves to the construction of a complete, just and lasting peace.

We have triumphed in the effort to implant hope in the breasts of the million of our people. We enter into a covenant that we shall build the society in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity - a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world.

As a token of its commitment to the renewal of our country, the new Interim Government of National Unity will, as a matter of urgency, address the issue of amnesty for various categories of our people who are currently serving terms of imprisonment.

We dedicate this day to all the heroes and heroines in this country and the rest of the world who sacrificed in many ways and surrendered their lives so that we could be free.

Their dreams have become reality. Freedom is their reward.

We are both humbled and elevated by the honour and privilege that you, the people of South Africa, have bestowed on us, as the first President of a united, democratic, non-racial and non-sexist government.

Primary Sources

Nelson Mandela's inauguration speech as President of South Africa cont.

We understand it still that there is no easy road to freedom.
We know it well that none of us acting alone can achieve success.

We must therefore act together as a united people, for national reconciliation, for nation building,
for the birth of a new world.

Let there be justice for all.

Let there be peace for all.

Let there be work, bread, water and salt for all.

Let each know that for each that for each the body, the mind and the soul have been freed to fulfil
themselves.

Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression
of one by another and suffer the indignity of being the skunk of the world.

Let freedom reign.

The sun shall never set on so glorious a human achievement!

God bless Africa!

Thank you.