

# Mandela Embodied the Victories and Failures of the South African Liberation Struggle

By [Glen Ford](#)

Global Research, December 06, 2013

[The Real News Network](#)

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*Now joining us to talk about Nelson Mandela and his legacy is Glen Ford. He's the cofounder and executive editor of the Black Agenda Report. He also colaunched, produced, and hosted America's Black Forum, the first nationally syndicated black news interview program on commercial television.*

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Transcript

*JAISAL NOOR, TRNN PRODUCER: Welcome to The Real News Network. I'm Jaisal Noor in Baltimore.*

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*Thank you for joining us, Glen.*

GLEN FORD, EXECUTIVE EDITOR, BLACKAGENDAREPORT.COM: Thank you for your invitation.

NOOR: Now, Glen, Nelson Mandela obviously had a tremendous impact on South Africa and the world. Can you talk a little bit about his contributions?

FORD: Nelson Mandela, to both foreigners and to South Africans, is really a kind of embodiment of the South African liberation struggle. He is the spawn of a royal [koUs@] family from the Transvaal. He became a lawyer. And he was one of the founding members of the African National Congress's youth wing. So this struggle has been his life's work. He figured prominently in all of the milestones of the African National Congress's rise to power. He was arrested in the 1956 great Treason Trial, when the South African white regime basically captured and detained all of the leadership of the anti-apartheid movement,

including people from all races.

He was a founder, along with members of the Communist Party, of the armed wing of the African National Congress, the Umkhonto we Sizwe, which means spear of the people. So he's not seen just as the world statesman that most foreigners and Americans think of him as, but he was one of those who were instrumental in launching the armed struggle in South Africa. In 1962, while running the armed wing and also making contacts all over the world on behalf of the struggle so that there would be support for this growing movement, he was captured and sentenced to life in prison. That was in 1962. And he did not emerge from prison until 1990.

But it's important to understand that in the latter half of the '80s, the white regime, which was fraying at the edges, which was under constant assault both from the oppressed nonwhite majority within South Africa but also militarily in Africa—it had suffered defeats at the hands of the Angolans and their Cuban allies in Angola, and the myth of South African military invulnerability had been shattered—the regime seems to have suffered at least a crisis of morale. And that finally resulted in Mandela being released without conditions in 1990. All of the parties that had been banned by the white regime were unbanned and made legal. And then we enter into this crucial period with Mandela now the unquestioned leader of not just the African National Congress but the resistance as a whole, this period from 1990 to 1994, when the negotiations begin in earnest as to what a free South Africa, a majority-ruled South Africa is going to look like. So when we talk about Nelson Mandela's legacy, his legacy is the South Africa that we see today. And to speak of his accomplishments, we have to speak of the state of South Africa.

NOOR: Glen, I wanted to ask you about Nelson Mandela's relationship with United States. He was on the U.S. government terrorist watchlist until as recently as 2008.

FORD: That's right. And the United States government, which was a fast friend of apartheid, a loyal supporter of that regime, as were the Israelis, the United States designated as terrorist whoever the white apartheid South African regime designated as terrorist. And that of course included all of the resistance, all of the leaders of the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party who were partners, along with COSATU, the Congress of South African Trade Unions, in this great struggle against that regime. The United States would simply designate as terrorist whoever their allies the South Africans did. And somehow they grew so deep into the habit that they forgot to take Mandela's name off the list until only a few years ago. He was officially a terrorist to the United States even as he was the president of South Africa.

NOOR: And, Glen, talk about what Mandela's legacy means today. Ronnie Kasrils, who was a fighter with the ANC, just republished an introduction to his autobiography, *Armed and Dangerous*. Can you tell us about the significance of this?

FORD: Ronnie Kasrils is a friend of mine, and we've had extensive conversations about that critical period in South Africa from 1990, when Mandela and other political prisoners were released and the political parties that had been banned were unbanned, and 1994, when he finally had the first nonracial elections, which resulted in Nelson Mandela becoming president. During that four years, the parties, the resistance, those three main actors, were struggling with the question of shall we make this an easy transition for those who are in power, that is, the white minority and the corporations, domestic and multinational, that

they defend, shall we avoid at all costs the kind of bloodbath that people had been expecting in South Africa before whites would relinquish power by making a deal that does not live up to our ideals, does not live up to the 1955 Freedom Charter, which had been the document, as far as South Africa's people were concerned, the embodiment on paper of what the resistance was all about, shall we compromise with this document, which called for the nationalization of all the mines and the redistribution of the land in South Africa. That is a fundamental change. Or should we go, at this stage, at least, for a simple transition of government through a simple one man, one vote deal?

They chose, that is, the ANC, the South African Communist Party, and COSATU chose to make it an unfinished revolution, a change in regime, but not a change in the relationships of economic power, so that we had what's been called the sunset clause. And the sunset clause was an agreement with the whites that the white civil service would be allowed to keep their jobs, well, for life and that there would be no nationalizations of the mines and the multinational corporations. That is, the economy would proceed as normal and the bloated bureaucracy which had been a welfare system for especially the Boer whites would remain in place. In return, blacks would get the vote.

What we have seen since that time is a South Africa that has made some progress in terms of providing housing, but was operating from such a deficit of services and resources to the overwhelmingly poor black majority that no transformation has taken place, and by many measurements the living conditions of the masses of people have gotten worse. So South Africa is now in a crisis that the deal that was made with this sunset clause, which puts much of the resources of South Africa out of reach of the state because of that agreement, starves the state of the resources that it needs in order to serve the people and make good on the promises of the revolution. So as we talk about the legacy of Nelson Mandela, that contradiction, which is coming to a head, is also part of his legacy.

NOOR: So, Glen, I want to end with just your final thoughts on what this revelation by Ronnie Kasrils means for the future of South Africa.

FORD: It was not so much a revelation but a conversation that Ronnie Kasrils and other members of the ANC and the South African Communist Party had been having for some time as they wrestle with the question of did we lose our nerve, did we in fact call the revolution prematurely, did we lack confidence in the masses of people, that they would stick with the revolution even in the face of this threatened massive bloodletting by the whites, did we compromise too much and lay the groundwork for the suffering that we see all around us. And Ronnie Kasrils has decided that the answer is yes. And he, as a veteran and a former member of the government under Nelson Mandela, says that he's going to own up to the mistakes that he made, and he challenges others in the South African leadership to do similarly. NOOR: Glen Ford, thank you so much for joining us. FORD: Thank you.

NOOR: Thank you for joining us on The Real News Network.

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