

Nelson Mandela

Former President of South Africa and Nobel Peace Laureate; a leader who has dedicated his life to the anti-apartheid struggle, democracy and equality; founder of The Elders.

- First President of post-apartheid South Africa 1994-1999
- Nobel Peace Laureate 1993
- Founder of The Elders and Honorary Elder
- Imprisoned for 27 years for his role in the anti-apartheid struggle

"This group can speak freely and boldly, working both publicly and behind the scenes. Together they will support courage where there is fear, foster agreement where there is conflict and inspire hope where there is despair."

Founding The Elders

[Nelson Mandela founded The Elders](#) in Johannesburg on his 89th birthday, 18 July 2007. With the help of [Graça Machel](#) and [Desmond Tutu](#), he brought together ten 'Elders' – independent, progressive leaders committed to building peace and advancing human rights – to work together on solutions to global problems, from climate change to violent conflict.

In a speech officially launching the group, he called on The Elders to act as “a fiercely independent and robust force for good, tackling complex and intractable issues - especially those that are not popular.”

Since founding The Elders, Nelson Mandela has retired and no longer plays an active role, but he remains an Honorary Elder and the inspiration for The Elders' work.

Anti-apartheid hero

One of the world's most revered statesmen, Nelson Mandela led the struggle against South Africa's apartheid regime and was eventually elected President in the country's first non-racial elections in 1994. Fondly known in South Africa by his clan name 'Madiba', he remains an inspiration to people around the world fighting injustice and oppression.

Mandela joined the African National Congress (ANC) in 1943 and led national anti-apartheid activities throughout the 1950s. He was repeatedly banned, arrested and imprisoned by South Africa's apartheid government and became part of the underground resistance movement, often travelling abroad to generate support for the anti-apartheid struggle.

Political prisoner

Mandela was arrested in 1962 and sentenced to five years in prison. While in prison he was also charged with plotting to overthrow the government by violence. During the Rivonia trial, as it came to be known, Mandela made one of his most famous statements:

"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 live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

In 1964 Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment and incarcerated on Robben Island. He spent the next 27 years in prison, but remained an influential leader of the anti-apartheid struggle throughout his time in jail. As international pressure on the apartheid government increased, Nelson Mandela was able to begin a dialogue with the apartheid government in 1985 before negotiating his eventual release in 1990.

Freedom and presidency

After his release from prison, Mandela stepped up to lead his people's liberation struggle, becoming leader of the ANC in 1991. In 1993, Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk, then President of South Africa, were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize "for their work for the peaceful termination of the apartheid regime, and for laying the foundations for a new democratic South Africa."

In 1994 he was elected President in South Africa's first non-racial elections – the first time that Mandela himself was able to vote in his own country. He served a five-year term.

67 years working for a better world

After stepping down as President in 1999, Mandela continued to work to advance peace, health and human rights in Africa. He has been particularly active in campaigning on HIV/AIDS, and facilitated peace negotiations in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi.

In 2009 the United Nations adopted [Nelson Mandela International Day](#) in celebration of his life and legacy. Mandela Day takes place on 18 July – Nelson Mandela's birthday – each year. The aim of the day is to encourage all of us to [spend 67 minutes of our time giving back to our community](#), just as Mandela spent 67 years of his life working for a better world.