

Mandela is Free!

Seldom has the release of a political prisoner held such great significance as Nelson Mandela's reunion with his people on February 11th, after 27 years in apartheid's dungeons. It would be difficult to describe or quantify the emotions this brought forth not only among his family, friends and comrades, but also among millions the world over who have grown to love and revere Mandela as a symbol of human courage and endurance in the battle against injustice. Mandela's release is concrete evidence of what both neutral and partisan observers, as well as the ANC itself, have been saying for some years now: The tide has turned and apartheid's demise is inevitable; it is coming soon.

Mandela's release is proof that the apartheid regime itself has now acknowledged this fact. Reaching this point has taken decades of popular and vanguard struggle, untold sacrifices and sustained international pressure. True, the Pretoria government unbanned the ANC and other anti-apartheid organizations in connection with Mandela's release. But this was more of a confirmation of the prevailing balance of forces: The masses had already lifted the ban in practice, especially with the rising struggle of the mid-eighties, where ANC slogans and symbols were frequently raised, and an increasing number of mass organizations in South Africa declared their alignment with the ANC.

What the De Klerk government is actually saying is that it is ready to negotiate with the ANC as the undisputed leadership of the broad anti-apartheid struggle. At the same time, the minority regime, including the pro-reform forces within it, will work to steer these negotiations in a direction which will leave decisive power and certain privileges in the hands of the white establishment.

Nelson Mandela and the ANC are well-aware that the war has not been won, but rather they are entering the final battle. This was clear in Mandela's speech to the crowd of 120,000 who gathered to welcome him back to Soweto: «There must be an end to white monopoly of political power and a fundamental restructuring of our political and economic systems to ensure that the inequalities of apartheid are addressed... The factors which necessitated the armed struggle still exist today. We have no option but to continue.» At the same time, he urged the government to meet the conditions for negotiations by lifting the state of emergency and freeing all political prisoners. Mandela advocated negotiations for «peace, democracy and freedom for all,» calling on whites to «join us in the making of a new South Africa» (*International Herald Tribune*, February 12th).

With Namibia's achievement of independence under SWAPO's leadership, the native people of Palestine and South Africa stand together as the sole remaining victims of settler-colonialism in the world today. The dual, but overlapping structure of the Palestinian revolution, with the intifada in the occupied territories and the PLO's political and military struggle from exile, is to a great extent similar to that of the Black majority's struggle, with the organized mass movement in South Africa and the ANC in exile. With the new stage signalled by Mandela's release, the ANC has officially reentered its homeland, reintegrating its various arenas of struggle. Achieving such a situation is also an aspiration of the Palestinian revolution. Perhaps more than any other people, the Palestinians are closely following the unfolding events in South Africa - and there is much to be learned.

One important lesson is the necessity

of a long-range view, revolutionary patience and persistent struggle that defy periods of set-back and hopelessness. The ANC's struggle dates back to 1912, when it was founded and embarked on non-violent resistance to apartheid. The adoption of the Freedom Charter in 1955 marked a turning point in that it laid down the principles of the democratic society for which the movement was struggling. Another turning point came with the 1960 Sharpeville massacre which prompted new thinking about whether the people's aspirations could be achieved solely via non-violent struggle in the face of the massive brutality practiced by the apartheid regime. As a result, the military wing of the ANC, Umkhonto Sizwe, was formed in 1961, and began armed struggle against the forces of apartheid. The arrest of Nelson Mandela, and his being sentenced to life imprisonment, along with other militants, came at this time with the racist regime's attempt to nip the vanguard struggle in the bud. But the ANC persisted in multifaceted struggle throughout these long decades until the eighties when the anti-apartheid movement was able to enforce the new balance of power which is the background for today's events.

The very question of Mandela's own release has been under negotiation for an extended period during which he resisted any impulse to attain his own freedom on conditions that would compromise the ongoing struggle for equality and justice. Yet there are those who advise the PLO to compromise basic Palestinian rights and its own leading role in hopes of gaining an undefined «something,» before it is too late. The experience of the struggle in South Africa speaks against such desperate approaches. It shows that freedom, whether of a people or one of their leaders, is not something to be