The Fall of Apartheid

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — Negotiation and the 1994 election

F.W. de Klerk and the Negotiations

By the late 1980s, the apartheid state faced a convergence of pressures that its most clear-sighted leadership recognised as existential. Economically, international sanctions and the debt crisis had created stagnation the white business community could no longer tolerate. Militarily, the South African Defence Force's intervention in Angola had ended in effective defeat at the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale in 1988, demonstrating that the apartheid state could not achieve military dominance even in neighbouring territories. Internally, the townships remained ungovernable despite the state of emergency. Internationally, South Africa's isolation was total and deepening.

F.W. de Klerk, who became State President in September 1989, was not a liberal — he was a conservative Nationalist who had spent his career supporting apartheid. But he was a pragmatist who understood that the system he had supported was no longer sustainable. On 2 February 1990, in a parliamentary speech that stunned even his own colleagues, he announced the unbanning of the ANC, the PAC, the South African Communist Party, and thirty-two other organisations; the release of political prisoners including Nelson Mandela; and the beginning of negotiations toward a new constitutional dispensation.

The negotiations that followed — conducted through the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) and subsequent multi-party talks — were immensely complex, often on the verge of collapse, and punctuated by political violence from right-wing white groups, from the Inkatha Freedom Party (which was receiving covert support from the apartheid security services), and from ANC supporters. The assassination of Chris Hani — the charismatic ANC and Communist Party leader — by a white right-wing extremist in April 1993 almost derailed the entire process. It was Mandela's television address to the nation that night — calm, authoritative, and refusing to allow Hani's murder to become the spark for racial civil war — that kept the process alive.

27 April 1994: The Day South Africa Was Born

On 27 April 1994, South Africans voted for the first time in a fully democratic election. The queues stretched for kilometres from polling stations across the country — some people waited twelve hours to cast their votes. Old people who had been born under segregation, who had lived their entire adult lives under apartheid, stood in those queues, many of them weeping, all of them understanding that this moment had been paid for by decades of sacrifice, imprisonment, exile, and death.

The ANC won 62.6% of the vote. Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as South Africa's first democratically elected President on 10 May 1994, in the Union Buildings in Pretoria — the seat of the apartheid government. In his inaugural address, he spoke of a new South Africa built on the values of human dignity, equality, and freedom. Standing behind him, as part of the guard of honour, were members of the South African Defence Force — the army that had tortured and killed ANC members for decades — standing alongside members of Umkhonto we Sizwe. The symbolism was deliberate and complete.

> *"Never, never and never again shall it be that this beautiful land will again experience the oppression of one by another. The sun shall never set on so glorious a human achievement. Let freedom reign. God bless Africa."*
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> **— Nelson Mandela, Presidential Inauguration Address, Pretoria, 10 May 1994**

Key Takeaways

Apartheid's collapse was the product of converging economic, military, internal, and international pressure that even a committed Nationalist like F.W. de Klerk recognised as unsustainable by 1990. The negotiations that followed survived deliberate attempts at derailment, including Chris Hani's assassination, through Mandela's steady leadership. The 27 April 1994 election — with its symbolism of the old and new armies standing side by side at Mandela's inauguration — marked the formal end of forty-six years of legislated racial oppression. The next lesson examines how the new South Africa chose to deal with the crimes of the system it had just dismantled.