The first democratic elections in South Africa

On 27 April 1994, all South Africans were allowed to cast their vote in the first free and democratic elections in the country. It was a profound moment. For the majority of South Africans it had been a long walk to freedom in which black South Africans had struggled for many years, against enormous odds. After years of humiliating apartheid laws, and ongoing struggle against repression and violence, the South African people had triumphed.

Celebrating ten years of democracy

On 27 April 2004, South Africa celebrated its first ten years of democracy. Although in its infancy, the new South Africa has much to celebrate. It has broken free from the shackles of institutionalised racial discrimination and inequality, and has moved towards a society which is just, democratic and free.

Democracy, Freedom, Reconciliation, Responsibility,
Diversity, Respect, Equality

In 1996, the most progressive constitution in the world was signed into law. The Constitution of South Africa is justly celebrated because of the guarantees of rights of equality that it contains:

The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth.

Extract from the Bill of Rights of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996

From Apartheid to Democracy -
the Struggle for Liberation
in South Africa

APARTHEID MUSEUM

Commissioned by the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of South Africa

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Introduction of Apartheid

Freedoms denied

1940s - 1950s

In 1948, the National Party, under the leadership of DF Malan, was voted into power on the election ticket of apartheid. Apartheid was a deliberate policy to deprive black South Africans of their freedoms. Apartheid was not a wholly new initiative. Since the mineral discoveries in the late 19th century, Africans had been increasingly deprived of their rights, and segregationist policies had been applied. However, with the implementation of apartheid, black people faced a more determined and systematic onslaught on their freedoms.

Apartheid laws
Between 1948 and 1953, the government institutionalised racial discrimination by passing a series of apartheid laws. Under these laws:
- All South Africans were to be classified according to race.
- Race determined where a person was born, educated, lived and was buried.
- African education was vastly inferior to white education.
- Different racial groups were not allowed to marry, nor were they allowed to have sexual relations.
- Blacks were not allowed to live in the same areas as whites. The pass laws were strengthened, making it even more difficult for Africans to enter the so-called white cities.
- Blacks were not allowed to make use of the same public facilities as whites.

Institutionalised racial discrimination
In 1948, the National Party, under the leadership of DF Malan, was voted into power on the election ticket of apartheid. Apartheid was a deliberate policy to deprive black South Africans of their freedoms. Apartheid was not a wholly new initiative. Since the mineral discoveries in the late 19th century, Africans had been increasingly deprived of their rights, and segregationist policies had been applied. However, with the implementation of apartheid, black people faced a more determined and systematic onslaught on their freedoms.

Dr DF Malan’s first cabinet was made up of men who believed ardently in Afrikaner nationalism and the protection of the Afrikaner race at all costs. Their answer to white people’s fears of being swamped by blacks was the complete separation of races through apartheid.

Sophiatown was a freehold township in Johannesburg where a multi-racial community thrived. Under the Group Areas Act, all blacks living in so-called white areas had to be removed. In the 1950s, the people of Sophiatown were removed to Meadowlands, an area of Soweto set aside for African occupation only.

Sexual relations between blacks and whites were forbidden under the Immorality Act. In order to prosecute people successfully under this law, it was necessary to establish firm proof of sexual relations. Here a magistrate peers through a bedroom window to check whether Professor Blacking and Dr Zurena Desai were having sex.

Dr Desai (left) and Professor Blacking (centre) were forced to emigrate to Britain after being found guilty under the Immorality Act. Others were not so lucky and spent time in prison.
Peaceful protest
In the 1950s, there was a groundswell of resistance as black South Africans responded to the loss of their freedoms through a series of campaigns and protests. The African National Congress (ANC) had carried the banner of protest for black people against unjust laws and racial discrimination since 1912. Until this point, the ANC had adopted a moderate stance against the government's segregationist policies, protesting through petitions and deputations. Now they promoted active campaigns of non-violent confrontation against the government.

Resistance campaigns in the 1950s
In 1952, the ANC, under the leadership of Albert Luthuli, launched the Defiance Campaign, where people deliberately broke the unjust laws of apartheid.

In 1955, the ANC, working together with other anti-apartheid organisations, including white liberal and radical organisations (the Congress Alliance), held the Congress of the People at Kliptown. Here the famous Freedom Charter was launched. Subsequently, 156 members of the Congress Alliance were charged with treason.

In 1956, when the government decided to extend passes to African women, 20,000 women marched to Pretoria in protest. The government responded to these non-violent protests with unchecked violence and increased repression.

The Congress Alliance started a campaign to collect the demands of ordinary South Africans for a just and free society. These demands were then listed in the Freedom Charter which was presented to the Congress of the People in 1955. The Freedom Charter became the overarching symbol of liberation in South Africa.

The Freedom Charter
We, the people of South Africa, declare for all our country and the world to know:

That South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justify claim authority unless it is based on the will of the people.

The people shall govern.
All national groups shall have equal rights.
The people shall share in the nation's wealth.
The land shall be shared among those who work it.
All shall be equal before the law.
All shall enjoy equal human rights.
There shall be work and security for all.
The doors of learning and culture shall be opened.
There shall be houses, security and comfort.
There shall be peace and friendship.

The government regarded the Freedom Charter as a treasonable document, believing that the Congress Alliance was planning to overthrow the state. They charged 156 members of the Congress Alliance with treason. The Treason Trial lasted from 1956 to 1961, but the state failed to prove treason, and eventually all were acquitted.

In 1956, the government extended passes to African women who, until that point, did not have to carry passes. Women protested strongly against such controls being placed upon them. 20,000 women marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria and handed over letters of protest to the prime minister.

Whites also protested against the unjust laws of apartheid. The Black Sash consisted of a group of white, mainly middle class women, who protested against the pass laws and other apartheid restrictions. They wore black sashes to mourn the end of constitutional law after the government abolished the coloured vote in 1953.
The Sharpeville Massacre

In 1959, some members of the ANC broke away to form the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC). In 1960, the PAC organised a peaceful protest against the pass laws at Sharpeville. The police responded violently, killing 69 people and wounding 180.

The aftermath of Sharpeville

Sharpeville marked a significant turning point in the struggle against apartheid. There was a massive outcry, both nationally and internationally, about the actions of the police. The government responded to this protest by declaring a state of emergency and banning the ANC and the PAC. This forced these movements underground.

The launch of the armed struggle

The ANC and PAC, spurred on by the popular protest against apartheid laws (such as the events at Cato Manor), changed tactics and took up arms against the white South African regime. The armed struggle was launched.

In 1963, the headquarters in Rivonia of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the ANC, were raided. The entire leadership of MK was arrested and tried for treason in what became known as the Rivonia Trial. Seven of the eight trialists, including Nelson Mandela, were found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment. They were to spend many long years in prison on Robben Island, just off the coast of Cape Town.

In 1963, a special law was passed by the South African government which allowed it to extend Robert Sobukwe’s imprisonment beyond the end of his three-year sentence.

At the Rivonia Trial (1963-1964), Mandela made his famous speech from the dock. He said: I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society it is an ideal which I hope to live for and achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.
Harsher security legislation

The arrest of the ANC leadership in the 1960s had left the liberation movement in tatters. The government tightened its grip through the introduction of even harsher security legislation. Police were given unlimited power. Detention without trial was introduced and became common. People were arrested and held, first for 90 days and then for 180 days, without being charged for an offence and were often tortured. In 1963, Solwandle Ngudli died in detention. His death was but the first of more than a hundred to follow. Resistance was at its lowest ebb.

Economic prosperity for whites

For white South Africans, the 1960s were a time of unprecedented prosperity. Foreign investment flowed in and the economy boomed. A small measure of this prosperity trickled downwards and there was the growth of a tiny African elite. But for the most part, black South Africans continued to struggle against poverty, hardship and repression.
Separate development

When Dr Verwoerd became prime minister in 1958, he set about further limiting the freedoms of African people by refining and extending the policy of apartheid into separate development. The government tried to turn the African reserves into separate countries or homelands. In these homelands, Africans would be given fake freedoms.

To conform with the process of decolonisation in Africa, Africans would be given their independence in their own homelands where they would have political rights. In this way, the government extended the myth of South Africa as a democratic nation, living alongside separate countries which would also enjoy full democracy. In reality, the majority of South Africans were stripped of their citizenship and their urban rights.

Forced removals

In order to implement this policy, the government forcibly removed over three and a half million people into the poverty-stricken homelands which had no facilities, nor any possibilities for making a living. Outside of the Soviet Union, these were the largest forced removals in the world.

Protest against the homelands policy

Not all white South Africans bought into the illusion of separate development. Protest came from within the churches, the universities and the trade unions. And Helen Suzman raised a lone voice of protest within parliament.

Ten homelands were created out of the former African reserves, which had been set aside for African occupation in 1913. They consisted of 13% of the land — for over 87% of the population. The homelands tried to entrench ethnicity and division, as each ethnic group was allocated a separate homeland.

People living in black spots were forcibly removed to the homelands where they endured lives of unspeakable hardship. Black spots were areas where blacks lived and owned land but were now designated as white areas.

The government insisted that there were measureless and limitless opportunities for the Bantu in the homelands. In reality, the homelands were overcrowded, infertile pieces of fragmented land with no facilities, no employment opportunities and little possibility of survival.

Among the few individuals who stood up to defend the rights of political prisoners was Helen Suzman, lone Progressive Party member of parliament from 1959 to 1974. Helen Suzman visited Robben Island on several occasions to investigate the treatment of political prisoners. She was responsible for significant improvements in the conditions of prisoners.

Rev Beyers Naud was an Afrikaner and a member of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), which actively supported and promoted apartheid for 22 years. He then suffered a crisis of conscience. He broke away from the DRC and became an active opponent of apartheid. He was banned for many years and continually subject to police harassment. Here Rev Naud (on the right) and Rev Kotze examine the wreckage of a progressive church in Cape Town that was burnt down by the apartheid state.
The rise of Black Consciousness

Out of the quiescence of the 1960s, a new resistance movement began to take hold. Black Consciousness, led by the charismatic leader Steve Biko, argued that blacks should develop pride in being black, and they should lead the struggle against apartheid.

The ideas of Black Consciousness began to appeal to African youth in schools who were angry at the poor quality of education for young Africans. Many of them also faced the prospect of unemployment and a life of hardship when they finished school.

The Soweto uprising

The major turning point came in 1976, when the government decided to force African students to learn half of their subjects in Afrikaans. This decision sparked off the Soweto uprising of 1976.

As the uprisings spread from Soweto to the rest of the country, the government clamped down on opposition leaders. Thousands of young people fled into exile. The Soweto uprising was a landmark event leading the government down the road to greater repression and limited reform.

Steve Biko very quickly became a threat to the security police because of his ability to inspire township youth with his message of black pride and action. In 1977 Steve Biko was detained and, after being severely tortured, died at the hands of the security police. South Africa had lost a great leader.

Susan Shabangu, a student activist in the 1976 uprising and now a member of Cabinet: "When our parents accepted Bantu Education, they said, 'Half a loaf is better than nothing.' We were saying, we don't want any half loaf. We either have a full loaf or nothing at all. That became our slogan."

After June 1976, South Africa lost many of its brightest sons and daughters to exile. Thousands fled to the neighbouring countries of Lesotho, Swaziland and Botswana, as well as Tanzania and Angola. Some went in search of a better education. Many joined the ranks of Umkhonto we Sizwe, entering the military camps for training as guerrilla fighters.
Total Strategy - Reform and Repression

1980s

The Soweto uprising had unleashed the anger of the people. In the 1980s, Prime Minister PW Botha referred to the pressures on the government as a ‘total onslaught’. His response was ‘total strategy’, with its twin pillars of reform and repression.

Introducing reforms

The government tried to appease sections of the black population by making concessions in a number of areas. In 1983, Indians and coloureds were given some representation in a tricameral parliament but Africans continued to be excluded from government on the grounds that they could vote for their own local community councils. PW Botha’s new constitution was nothing short of a sham democracy.

Under the umbrella of reform, the government also recognised African trade unions and acknowledged the reality of the urban African population by giving urban Africans permanent urban rights, while attempting to block new African arrivals from the countryside into the towns. The process of giving African homelands political independence was accelerated in the hope of satisfying African political aspirations.

Intensifying repression

At the same time, the government increased its military expenditure substantially and intensified the forces of repression. Organisations were banned and thousands of political activists were detained and tortured. The number of deaths in detention rose significantly.

PW Botha, the former minister of defence, became prime minister in 1978. His promises to reform apartheid echoed hollowly in the wake of intensified repression and unprecedented government spending on the military.

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The formation of the United Democratic Front

In order to give the illusion of respectability to his new reforms, PW Botha unintentionally opened up spaces for real democratic structures and opposition to emerge. Many anti-apartheid groups and trade unions came together to form the United Democratic Front (UDF). Both the UDF and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) mobilised thousands upon thousands of people in an active struggle against apartheid.

“Making the townships ungovernable”

From exile, Oliver Tambo, the president of the ANC, called on the people “to make the townships ungovernable.” Unemployed youth responded enthusiastically to the calls from the UDF and the ANC. These ‘comrades’ determined the pace of political resistance in the townships, toyi-toyi-ing defiantly against the casspirs and police. Despite the states of emergency in 1985, and then again in 1986, the government was unable to stem the tide of resistance.

The first steps to freedom

In 1989, the government finally realised that it could no longer ignore the demands of blacks for political rights. In 1990, under the leadership of FW de Klerk, Nelson Mandela and his comrades were released from jail, the ANC, PAC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) were unbanned and apartheid laws were abolished. Responding to mass resistance and increasing international pressure, the white South African government had taken its first steps to freedom.

The legal recognition of African trade unions opened up spaces for trade unions to conduct political protests against the government. In 1985, the largest federation of trade unions was formed with the launch of COSATU, representing more than half a million workers. Trade unions filled the gap created by the banning of many political organisations.

In 1984, the Vaal Triangle, an area of black townships to the south of Johannesburg, exploded in violence triggered by repeated increases in rent of municipal houses. The remarkable thing about the uprising is that it was led by young children. Despite a massive police and army presence, the state never regained full control of the townships.

As the government sent more and more troops to occupy the townships, many young white South African men became increasingly unhappy with having to perform their military service. The End Conscription Campaign was formed in 1983 to oppose the conscription of white men into the South African Defence Force.
The ANC in exile

After Sharpeville, a new chapter was opened in the South African struggle for freedom as a number of activists moved into exile. Oliver Tambo, then deputy president of the ANC, was sent to London in 1960 to develop an external wing of the ANC.

Many African countries such as Egypt, Algeria, Ghana and Tanzania offered bases and military training. In 1963, the OAU Liberation Committee declared its support for the efforts of the ANC and PAC to overthrow white rule by military and other means.

The Anti-Apartheid Movement

In 1960, the Anti-Apartheid Movement was set up by South African exiles and local sympathisers in Britain and Sweden. Starting in 1963, the efforts of these escalating pressure groups led to the imposition of the UN arms embargo on South Africa, a mounting disinvestment campaign and an increasingly comprehensive sport and cultural boycott.

Many southern African countries paid a high price for their support of the ANC and the PAC as South Africa conducted cross-border raids, and continued to apply economic pressure on these economically-dependent states.

▶ New life was injected into the exile movement when thousands of young people left South Africa and took up military training in MK in the wake of the Soweto uprisings.

▶ Assassinations of high profile anti-apartheid activists in exile were commonplace. Dulcie September was shot five times and killed as she was opening the ANC office in Paris in 1988. This poster was used by the ANC in the first democratic election of 1994 to remind the electorate of the high cost of freedom.

“Without solidarity from the international community, South Africa would not be where it is today. We won an extraordinary victory against one of the most abominable systems the world has seen. We want the world to know how much we owe them and how grateful we are for their help.”

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

▶ The Anti-Apartheid Movement called on the British government to impose a trade boycott on South Africa and for disinvestments in South African companies. It had no support from its own government, but thousands of ordinary people joined protest marches in solidarity with the ANC.

▶ After Sharpeville, Oliver Tambo (second from the left) went into exile to continue the struggle abroad. He was central in keeping the ANC alive and gaining support from African leaders in the fight against apartheid. Here he is pictured in the mid-1980s with Samora Machel, Eduardo Dos Santos and Julius Nyerere.

▶ Apartheid was equally applied in sporting activities and South Africa was banned from the Olympics in 1962. The Anti-Apartheid Movement played a role in preventing South African sports teams from playing abroad. Sporting isolation hit keen South African sports fans almost more than any other sanctions.
After Sharpeville and the banning of the political organisations, Mandela helped organise a mass stay-at-home in May 1961. This only served to generate more tension with the police. Mandela came to see that the only way forward was to take up arms. He said in a television interview in 1961: "If the government reaction is to crush by naked force our non-violent struggle, we will have to reconsider our tactics. In my mind we are closing a chapter on this question of non-violent policy."

The ANC established a military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation) or MK, in 1961.

On 11 February 1990, Nelson Mandela took his first steps of freedom as he walked out of the gates of the Victor Verster prison. As he raised his right fist in the victory salute of the ANC, the whole of South Africa cheered. For Mandela and South Africa, "life was beginning anew." By now Mandela was increasingly being referred to by his Xhosa name 'Madiba'.

In 1963, Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment. Mandela called his time on Robben Island 'the dark years'. In his cell, he had only a mat, a bedroll and two blankets. When he lay down to sleep, his head touched the one wall, his feet the other. Mandela worked hard at keeping himself mentally and physically strong. When PW Botha offered him freedom in 1985 if he renounced all violence, Mandela sent a message to the people with his daughter Zindzi. "I cherish my own freedom dearly, but I care even more for your freedom... I cannot and will not give any undertaking at a time when I and you, the people, are not free. Your freedom and mine cannot be separated. I will return."

In jail, Mandela was a symbol of continuing resistance, and the sacrifices that so many people had made in the name of the struggle against apartheid. As a free man, Mandela became a symbol of the spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation that was to shape the new South Africa. Nelson Mandela has inspired the world with his moral integrity and goodness, and has become the icon of the 20th century. In 1998, Mandela married Graça Machel, after divorcing Winnie Mandela a few years before.
On the Brink

1990 – 1994

Convention for a Democratic South Africa

In 1991, negotiations for a new South Africa began at the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA). At these talks Mandela and de Klerk negotiated the way forward. Unfortunately the negotiations took place against a backdrop of intense violence. There were clashes between the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) who supported Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi. Massacres of people at Boipatong and Bisho threatened to derail the negotiations.

Talks break down

Mandela accused De Klerk of treachery – of deliberately promoting the ongoing violence through the ‘Third Force’ and there certainly was strong evidence of such complicity. White right-wing extremists also responded to the idea of a new South Africa with violence, and it was during this period that Chris Hani, the leader of the South African Communist Party, was assassinated. Both Chief Buthelezi and the Conservative Party walked out of the talks. The fragile unity achieved by Mandela’s release seemed poised to collapse into civil war.

A compromise is reached

However, despite the terrible violence, the process of negotiations continued in fits and starts. It was only on the basis of a compromise that a date was set for the first democratic elections - 27 April 1994.
The first democratic elections in South Africa

The first democratic elections in South Africa were preceded by much uncertainty. Fears of violence gripped the country. Would the hostile right-wing opposition commit acts of sabotage? Would Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi’s non-involvement in the elections provoke further clashes between Inkatha and the ANC? Would the former leaders of the homelands react violently to their re-incorporation? The Conservative Party finally agreed to stand, and at the last minute, Chief Buthelezi agreed to co-operate. The IFP had to be added hurriedly to the election list.

Mandela’s inauguration

On 10 May 1994, Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as the first democratically elected president of South Africa. Almost immediately, the government addressed the issue of a democratic constitution, and in 1996, the most progressive constitution in the world was signed into law.

Challenges facing the new government

One of the major obstacles confronting the new democratic government was how to reduce the extremes of poverty and inequality in South Africa. The government introduced the Reconstruction and Development Programme, and began the task of providing jobs, housing, water, education and electricity to the poor.

On 27 April 1994, voters began arriving at the polling stations from early in the day. Twenty million people - black and white - stood together in the long queues, waiting patiently in the hot sun to cast their vote for freedom. It was a joyous day, filled with hope and optimism as South Africans embraced a new future.

The election day was largely peaceful. The ANC won 63%, the National Party 20% and the IFP 11%. These parties then formed a Government of National Unity.

Mandela’s ability to strike just the right note and effect reconciliation through his actions is highlighted by his wearing of the Springbok rugby captain’s jersey on the day of the World Cup Final in 1995. When Mandela joined the team on the field, he earned the love and respect of many Afrikanners who had traditionally seen rugby as their sport.

The first priority of the Reconstruction and Development Programme was to improve the quality of life of all South Africans by meeting the basic needs of the people. This involved tackling poverty among the urban and rural poor. Millions of people have been given access to key services such as electricity, water and sanitation. And over 2,3 million subsidies have been approved for new houses.

Bantu Education had succeeded in creating an unequal education system in which black education lagged far behind. Racial separation had resulted in eighteen separate education departments. Massive advances have been made since 1994 in combining these departments and evening out education delivery.

When looking at this photograph, it becomes clear just how far South Africa has journeyed from 1948. The all-white, all-male cabinet of Dr DF Malan has been transformed into a Constituent Assembly of men, women, blacks and whites. This photograph underlines the progress that South Africa has made in building a constitutional democracy where all people are free and equal.
The terms of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) emerged as part of a deal reached at the CODESA negotiations. This deal involved granting amnesty for politically motivated human rights abuses, provided the perpetrators confessed to their crimes. The TRC's role was to discover the truth about South Africa's tortured past by giving voice to apartheid's victims. Past injustices were to be addressed "on the basis that there is a need for further understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation."

The painful road to reconciliation

The emphasis was on truth-telling. Thousands of victims and survivors came forward to the TRC to tell their stories. Perpetrators of apartheid crimes who made a full disclosure were granted amnesty. Those who failed to do so now face prosecution for their crimes against humanity. And for the victims, there will be some form of reparations.

The TRC's public hearings exposed the violence and barbarity of apartheid to many whites for the first time. Only once they were able to acknowledge that these atrocities had taken place, could the process of reconciliation begin.

"History does not wipe away the memories of the past," concluded the TRC. "It understands the vital importance of learning from and redressing past violations for the sake of our shared present and our children's future ... Reconciliation requires a commitment - especially by those who have benefited and continue to benefit from past discrimination - to the transformation of unjust inequalities and dehumanising poverty."
Stabilising the economy

After the euphoria of the transition years, Thabo Mbeki’s presidency had to ensure that South Africa’s 44 million residents would begin to reap the fruits of democracy. South Africa had inherited a massive apartheid debt, and the inequalities of apartheid were still sharply apparent. President Mbeki has stabilised the domestic economy and re-integrated South Africa into the global economy in a masterly fashion. Black economic empowerment has gone some way to redress a racially imbalanced economy and the government has continued major spending programmes on social services.

New Partnership for Africa’s Development

Mbeki has placed his own personal stamp on the presidency with his vision of an African Renaissance and has put South Africa at the centre of African affairs through the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD).

Challenges facing Mbeki’s government

There are still major challenges facing the ANC government elected to its third term with an increased majority in April 2004. These include unemployment, violent crime, and a high rate of HIV/AIDS infection. These issues are of great concern to many people and are the topic of energetic debates in South Africa. But there is no doubt that South Africa has already overcome incredible obstacles, and that efforts to address poverty and inequality continue. South Africa is building a robust and democratic society, which is beginning to deliver a better life for all.
South Africa’s achievements
1994-2004

“During the first decade, we have made great progress towards the achievement of the goals we enunciated as we took the first steps as a newborn child. We also laid a strong foundation to score even greater advances during the exciting and challenging second decade ahead of us, as a people united to build a better South Africa and a better world.”

President Thabo Mbeki, State of the Nation Address, 6 February 2004

South Africa is a relatively small country with a short history of democracy. And yet, in the last ten years, South Africans from all walks of life have excelled in every sphere. Here we pay tribute to a selection of South Africans who have achieved recognition on the world stage since 1994 in the fields of social activism, sport, science and the arts. Out of the ashes of apartheid, South Africans are building a better society and are pursuing greatness in many fields of endeavour.
Turbulent Times

Thabo Mbeki served two terms as president. However, during the course of his second term, he faced a challenge to his leadership. At the ANC’s Conference in December 2007, Mbeki stood for re-election as president of the ANC. At the time, Jacob Zuma, his great political rival, also stood for election. Zuma won the contest, becoming president of the ANC. Then, in September 2008, the ANC recalled Mbeki, asking him to step down as president of the country. National elections were held soon afterwards in 2009. The ANC won a landslide victory and Jacob Zuma became president of the country.

The changeover from Mbeki to Zuma was a turbulent time for the country. Jacob Zuma emerged as a popular leader, representing the aspirations of the majority of people, and especially poor people. However, he was also a controversial figure. As president, Zuma has promoted unity and development, and committed the government to a far-reaching agenda.

2010 and Beyond

Since then the country has enjoyed stability and a measure of success. The South African economy has weathered the recession relatively well, although unemployment remains high. Service delivery has improved in some areas, such as better management of HIV/AIDS.

In June/July 2010 South Africa hosted a highly successful Fifa Soccer World Cup. The international community praised South Africa for its excellent infrastructure, smooth organisation and vibrant atmosphere. South Africans once again felt proud and united, ready to face the future and all its challenges.

The South African government is committed to addressing the needs of all South Africans, especially the poor. There have been some notable successes in this regard, such as the provision of social grants for the elderly, the disabled and children at risk. However, there is much more to be done. In recent years there have been numerous protests by communities demanding better services. The Zuma government has committed itself to improving service delivery at all levels, and to fighting crime and corruption.

The South African economy has continued to develop. In 2009 the economy contracted by 1.8%, but returned to growth in 2010, partly as a result of a government-funded infrastructure programme. However, unemployment is still very high at 25%. Though South Africa faces substantial challenges in addressing poverty, inequality and unemployment, it remains the largest economy in Africa and is key to the future of the continent.

The 2010 Fifa World Cup was an opportunity for South Africans to reflect on the progress we have made in the last twenty years. The entire nation was focused on the success of the event, and there was great excitement throughout the country. Despite the pain of our past, we have built a shared society that can stand proudly on the world stage.
Best foreign film

“In Tsotsi’s dark eyes,” says the director Gavin Hood, “we should, in the end, see ourselves.”

In 2006, the South African movie Tsotsi directed by Gavin Hood won an Academy Award in the category of “Best Foreign Film”. The film was based on playwright Athol Fugard’s only novel, originally written in the early 1960s but published in 1980. While Fugard was famous for depicting the lives of black South Africans under the oppressive apartheid regime, Hood chose to set his adaptation in post-apartheid South Africa.

Gangster with a heart

The movie tells the story of a hardened teenage thug or tsotsi. The word means “gangster” in South African township slang. In the film adaptation, Tsotsi, played by Presley Chweneyagae, steals a car from a wealthy suburban home. To his dismay, he discovers a baby lying on its back seat. Instead of abandoning the baby whose mother he has shot and injured, Tsotsi takes the child back to the sprawling shantytown where he lives.

Here he forces Miriam, a recently widowed single mother played by Terry Pheto, to breastfeed the baby. This surprising turn of events sets in motion an inner journey for Tsotsi.

Crime in contemporary South Africa

Tsotsi, says its director, aimed to transport audiences into “the diverse landscape of South Africa – skyscrapers and shacks, wealth and poverty, violent anger and gentle compassion.”

Indeed, local audiences were riveted by a plot that resonated with some of the most pressing concerns of the new democracy. Movie-goers debated their own experiences of violent crime in contemporary South Africa.

Economic rifts have widened in South Africa – despite the social policies of successive post-apartheid governments. Tsotsi’s casual brutality plays itself out against the backdrop of urban slums and informal settlements where the struggle for scarce resources – food, water, electricity, employment – continues to be a major challenge.

Yet for all the sombre realities it highlights, Tsotsi is a work of exuberant creativity. It offers a compelling perspective on the manner in which contemporary South Africans understand the complex realities in which they are enmeshed.
“To be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”

Nelson Mandela

The Apartheid Museum is an independent organisation registered as a section 21 company not for gain. It is dependent on funding raised from the private and public sectors to finance its activities and educational programmes.

The museum conveys a universal message of the perilous consequences of racism and discrimination, and the peaceful resolution of conflict through dialogue, negotiation and reconciliation. This message is one which the world needs to be reminded of, never to forget.

Should you wish to support the museum in its work through a financial contribution, or if you are interested in receiving exhibition material, please contact the museum.

Racism should remain where it belongs - in a museum. Witness the triumph of the human spirit over adversity, and walk away free!