

# Freedom and the importance of responsibility

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APRIL is all about freedom, celebrating the time that freedom came to all with the birth of the new South Africa, a place where all citizens are equals, and the end of a despotic government in which only some were free.

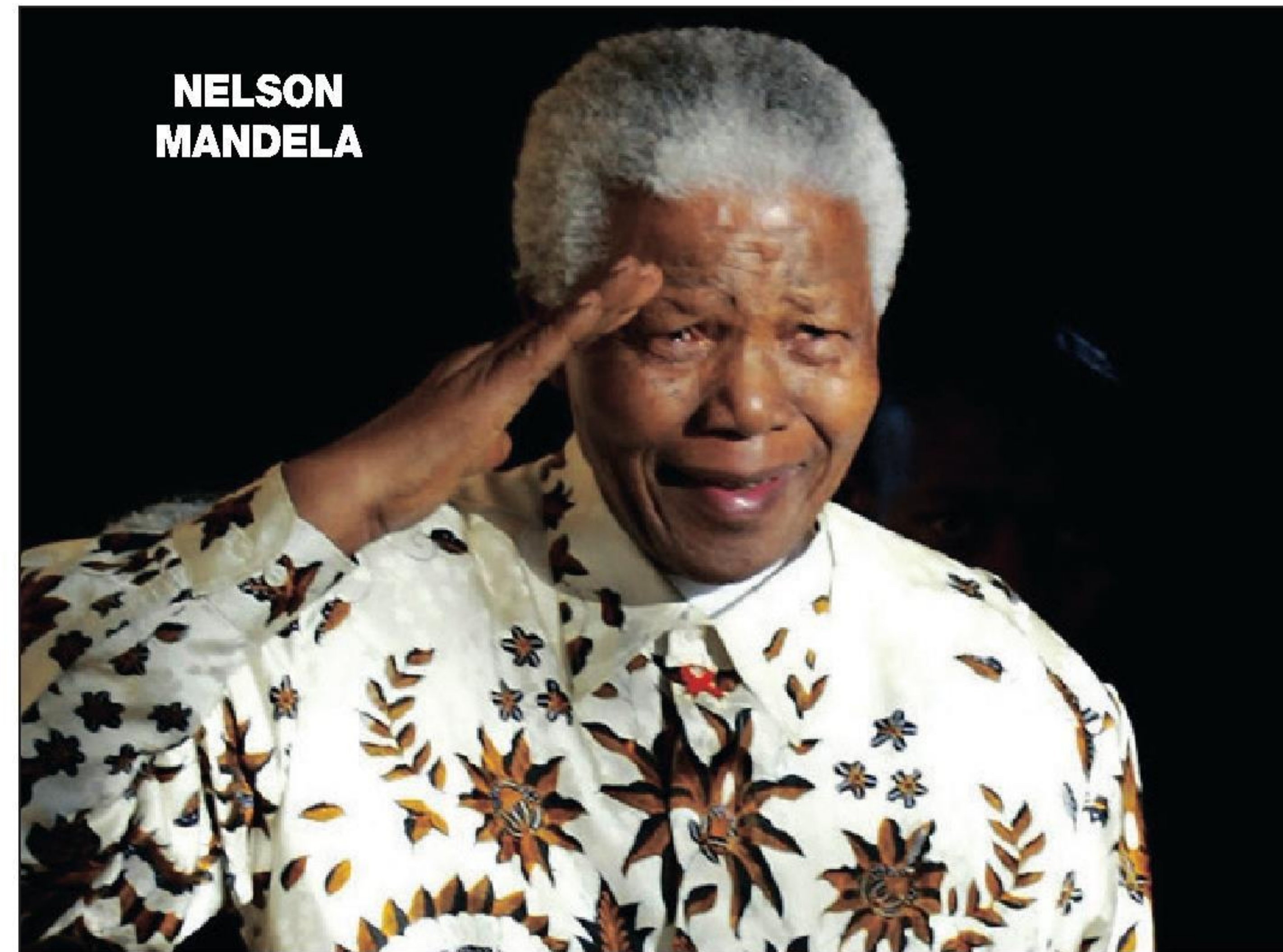
Whether we are from the previously oppressed or the oppressor, we were all freed from our respective chains in 1994, so that we all could bask in the wonderful light of living in a free and equal society.

But what is the meaning of freedom? It stems from the old English word “freedom”, encompassing meanings such as self-determination, exemption from despotic control and civil liberty. When we reflect on freedom, there are three kinds of freedom we need to consider: 1) freedom from something, 2)

freedom to do... and 3) freedom as a mindset.

Freedom from something refers to aspects such as freedom from oppression and freedom from a despotic government. Although acquiring this freedom in South Africa demanded many years of struggle, costing the personal freedom and lives of many, this “freedom from” was constitutionally achieved in April 1994, and a government should now be able to keep this fairly easily in a good state.

However, with a president and Parliament that have been found guilty by the Constitutional Court of not upholding their oath of office, the previous public protector’s finding evidence of state capture and the president’s refusal to accept responsibility, and rather attempting to silence her, one can quite rightly question



whether South Africa is really free from a despotic government. True freedom from despotic oppression demands also freedom from more implicit oppressions by those in power.

The second kind of freedom

is about the liberty to live your life in the way you choose and to do what you decide to do, which is an inherent human right. However, too often we see the misconception that freedom implies one can do whatever

one wants to do, including oppressing others; being selfish, unethical and corrupt; and exploiting those who have no power. This is an immature perspective of what freedom means.

Freedom is not infinite: self-determination does not mean freedom of action with disregard to its consequences. If freedom is expressed indiscriminately, it ultimately lapses again in despotism and anarchy. Unconfined freedom can be as devastating and disruptive as legalised oppression. In the words of Madiba: “For 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.”

With a history of oppression in South Africa, often there is a delusion that anything done in the name of freedom is above and beyond criticism. However,

it can never be just the freedom of a chosen few. The freedom of all must be upheld. Freedom of self-determination is not only a right, because “with freedom comes responsibility” (Eleanor Roosevelt).

Even when we are free, we remain responsible and accountable for everything we do. With responsibility comes the duty to respond appropriately and to be accountable for what we do. As Jean-Paul Sartre said: “Man is condemned to be free.” It is exactly because I am free, that I cannot blame anyone else for my deeds and choices.

Freedom without responsibility creates a culture of hedonistic, short-term gratification, promoting arrogance and hubris, widespread corruption and abuse of power for one’s own benefits, at the cost of those you are supposed to serve.

As liberated citizens, we all

potentially have the making of a Madiba and a Verwoerd in us. Who we become is not from our environment, but the choices we freely make.

It is illogical and anti-freedom for the top echelons of the South African government to blame our tarnished history for their own corrupt and oppressing choices; choices that hurt the powerless, while the elites remain “free” from the liability to account for what they do.

Thirdly, freedom is not only about constitutional freedom: “freedom and slavery are mental states” (Mahatma Gandhi). If I don’t feel free, notwithstanding objective freedom, I am not free.

This may sound irrational, but the unconscious is a powerful part of the mind that controls our thinking and actions more than we often realise. Calls from politicians to sup-

press or deny one’s conscience are an indictment on freedom.

As liberated citizens, we cannot obey this call because some argue it is better for a so-called majority. Indeed, “in matters of conscience, the law of the majority has no place” (Mahatma Gandhi). We have the freedom to make our own decisions, and the liability to do so responsibly.

We can choose to be enslaved by history, but we have freedom now to do the right thing; freedom not to suppress our conscience in support of corrupt leadership.

Being free from oppression and having free choice is a wonderful but delicate and fragile gift that we must cherish, nurture and safeguard for generations to come. If we don’t, it will shatter on the floor of despotic anarchy, never again to be repaired.

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