

Ambassadorial Experiences | Part 2

Nelson Mandela's first public appearance

... and why he was forced to delay it



Nelson Mandela, after 27 years of incarceration by the Apartheid regime, was finally set free in Capetown on a sunny and hot Sunday on February 11, 1990. I, at that time, had the good fortune to act as the dean of the Diplomatic Corps and in that capacity took part in the ceremony.

Mandela was set to publicly appear together with his wife Winnie precisely at 3 p.m. and all national and international TV stations were anxiously awaiting this big event. But Mandela did not come – it went 3.15 p.m. and then 3.30 p.m. and the famous prisoner was not seen. A nervous atmosphere filled the air and the first predictions that the man was either killed or unwell floated around. When Mandela had still not shown himself at 3.45 p.m., the TV stations did not know how to react and to explain the situation. Today, alternative ad hoc programs would be brought in to bridge the gap, but then the South African TV stations were totally helpless and constantly referred back and forth between their director's desk and the place outside the prison.

Finally, at 4 p.m. a triumphant and broadly smiling Mandela came out, holding the hand of Winnie and waving to the crowd. Insiders in the Diplomatic Corp, including myself, knew that Mandela would be a man of peace and reconciliation and thus would be the spirit of his first major political speech, arranged later on the day on the main square of Capetown. To the utter bewilderment and shock of us all, Mandela held ab immensely aggressive and uncompromising speech and was thus cheered by a large crowd of this extremist ANC (African National Congress) followers.

And now comes the clou: As the dean of the Corps, I had personal access to the famous man a few days later. I asked him privately about the reason for the delay.

Nelson Mandela said to me – and I shall never forget this in my whole life – “Ambassador, if you promise me strict confidentiality, I tell you the reason. I had drafted a totally different and rather conciliatory speech, which you would have rightly expected from me, but when my comrades in the ANC saw the draft, they sternly objected and told me ‘you will never make such a speech, contrary to our lifelong struggle’ against the hated regime.”

“I – said Nelson – therefore had to redraft the speech practically in the last minute and it took me an hour to do it – this is the secret of the delay.”

I had honored his request for secrecy for a very long time.

Let us have your thoughts and comments!
We are looking forward to receiving them!

About the author



Former Ambassador Dr Alexander Christiani is the Vice-President of the Austro-British Society and leads the ABS Expert Group which releases high-quality Policy Papers with first-hand background information on current political developments. Dr Christiani is a member of the board of the Austrian Society for Foreign Politics and the United Nations. His professional career led him to the hotspots of political developments all over the world (e.g. to the Middle East, South Africa, New York and many others) where he contributed reasonably to Austria’s excellent diplomatic reputation in the world.

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