

The Mandela muddle

PRETORIA — This past weekend, South Africans held their breath, waiting to see if the rumors that imprisoned black nationalist leader, Nelson Mandela, were about to come true. All of the elements seemed to have finally come together that would have allowed the government to release Mandela.

On Monday, however, word leaked out of Pretoria and Capetown that Mandela would not be released after all. The risk, said South Africa's government, was simply too great.

What could have been the perfect time to free Mandela has been allowed to slip away. Mandela, one of the founders of the banned African National Congress, has been in prison for the past 26 years, serving a life sentence for terrorism. Now 70, Mandela has recently contracted a mild case of tuberculosis. He was transferred from his cell at Capetown's Pollsmoor prison to Tygerberg Hospital — not, as wrongly reported by some of the Canadian media, after 13 days of neglect — but as soon as his condition was diagnosed.

Many here in South Africa hoped the government would seize this opportunity to either free the ailing Mandela outright or at least transfer him to a clinic where he could recuperate and be allowed visits on a regular basis by family, friends and even political followers. After a few months, went this theory, Mandela would be "demythologized" and much of the pressure that has built up for his release would be harmlessly vented. A good idea, to be sure, but one that was not acceptable to the state security council that is the only organ capable of freeing Mandela.

Conservative white South Africans fear that no matter how Mandela is released, his freeing will ignite a dangerous and completely unpredictable political explosion.

The government has long offered Mandela a deal that would gain his release. If he will renounce violence in writing, Pretoria promises to free him. But Mandela refuses to do so, knowing such a pact would discredit him in the eyes of young blacks and take away the ANC's main bargaining chip in dealing with the stubborn Afrikaner leadership.

But it's also true the government has long wanted to free Mandela because the issue of his imprisonment is being used by the outside world as a club against South Africa. Mandela has become a cult figure around the world, particu-

**ERIC
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larly to young people who couldn't find South Africa on a map. "Free Mandela" has joined "Save the Whales" as an international mantra.

There is also grudging respect for Mandela among South Africa's leadership. Old enemies tend to become old friends if they hang around long enough. The old men who run both the ANC and South Africa often have more in common with each other than with their younger subordinates.

But much as South Africans want to see Mandela freed, they just don't know how to do it.

The government would also like to see Mandela out of jail because this would probably produce a power struggle within the ranks of the ANC. Would the existing ANC leadership take orders from the comparatively more moderate Mandela? Saints and saviors returning to earth are a headache to their priests and worshippers. Most ANC leaders would prefer, I suspect, to see Mandela either safely in exile somewhere far away — say Sweden — or even in jail. If this sounds too cynical, recall the case of Ahmed Ben Bella, one of the founders of the Algerian revolution. After years in a French prison, he was released, returned triumphantly to a liberated Algeria, and was promptly jailed by his erstwhile supporters.

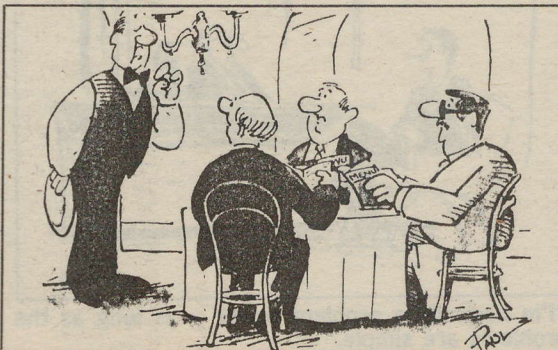
But keeping Mandela in prison poses grave dangers to South Africa. If Mandela should die in prison, there would certainly be a worldwide eruption of rage and a torrent of new punitive measures against the republic. No one here, except South Africa's far right crazies, wants to see the proud, old hereditary chief die in prison. Yet South Africa also fears that if it releases Mandela, he may be assassinated by those in the ANC who do not want to see him reassume power — or by the communists who would score a double coup in removing the most popular non-communist ANC leader and by provoking an orgy of violence.

Exile might be the best solution, at least for the time being. But Mandela has said no to renouncing violence and, from what I have been told by people who know, he has just as firmly rejected the notion of exile.

Many South African editorial writers and cartoonists have quite rightly noted that the South African government is just as much a prisoner as Nelson Mandela: Each holds the other in a seemingly unbreakable deathgrip.

Obviously, the government here needs some courageous and, yes, risky action. Mandela cannot be allowed to wither away and die in prison. Twenty-six years behind bars is twice too much for his political crimes, even if you accept that they were really crimes at all. The immovable, heel-dragging President P.W. Botha is just going to have to be hectorated by many of his citizens and the rest of the world until he finds some way of letting Mandela out of prison. Botha needs to show he has as much courage as stubbornness.

Punch



"They're called Russian mussels because you never know who's going to get the bad one."