

Editorial: Just Free Nelson Mandela

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Much that ails South Africa is apparent in microcosm in the meeting last week between President P. W. Botha and Nelson Mandela, jailed leader of the African National Congress. Not since the A.N.C.'s establishment in 1912 has any South African president or prime minister deigned to meet with its leader.

If this is a Botha trick to demean the captive and upstage the President's likely successor, black leadership is justified in crying foul. But whatever Mr. Botha's motives, the visit sends an unmistakable message — that Mr. Mandela is a legitimate leader with whom South Africans must reckon. And if the Botha-Mandela meeting makes it easier for the next leader in Pretoria to act on that moral and political fact, some good can come of it.

Mr. Botha is a grudging lame duck, forced by illness to yield leadership of the ruling National Party to F. W. de Klerk, who is expected to succeed to the presidency after elections in September. Rivalry is already evident between the crusty incumbent and his more articulate, better-educated heir apparent. It's too early to say how far the new leader is willing to go, but he has stirred hope by favoring a new constitution that provides some political rights for blacks.

Mr. Botha's eagerness to appear a benevolent jailer may be a sign of change. In December, he moved Mr. Mandela from prison to a luxurious clinic; now officials claim that in last week's 45-minute meeting, Mr. Mandela affirmed his support for "peaceful development in South Africa." Yet why should anyone trust the official version? Even after 27 years in prison, Mr. Mandela is still forbidden to speak for himself.

The only way to know what Mr. Mandela thinks is to free him, and then listen to what he says. The test for Mr. de Klerk is whether he will be the first South African head of government willing to deal with unsubmitive blacks openly, fairly and freely.