

African Decolonization

The African push for independence actually began in the decades before World War II. French-speaking Africans and West Indians began to express their growing sense of black consciousness and pride in traditional Africa.

When World War II erupted, African soldiers fought alongside Europeans to “defend freedom.” This experience made them unwilling to accept colonial domination when they returned home. The war had changed the thinking of Europeans too. Many began to question the cost, as well as the morality, of maintaining colonies abroad. These and other factors helped African colonies gain their freedom throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

European Policies Cause Problems

When the Europeans established colonial boundaries, they ignored existing ethnic or cultural divisions. New borders divided peoples of the same background or threw different—often rival—groups together. Because of this, a sense of national identity was difficult to develop. After independence, the old colonial boundaries became the borders of the newly independent states. As a result, ethnic and cultural conflicts remained.

Other problems had an economic basis. European powers had viewed colonies as sources of wealth for the home country. The colonial powers encouraged the export of one or two cash crops, such as coffee or rubber, rather than the production of a range of products to serve local needs. Europeans developed plantations and mines but few factories. Manufactured goods were imported from European countries. These policies left new African nations with unbalanced economies and a small middle class. Such economic problems lessened their chances to create democratic stability.

European rule also disrupted African family and community life. In some cases, colonial powers moved Africans far from their families and villages to work in mines or on plantations. In addition, most newly independent nations still lacked a skilled, literate work force that could take on the task of building a new nation.

Violent Revolutions

In nations that had high populations of European settlers living in them, violence often erupted. Nations such as Kenya, Southern Rhodesia, and Algeria had to take up arms against their European rulers in order to ultimately win their freedom.

The British had ruled Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, and many British settlers resisted in these nations’ independence— especially those who had taken over prize farmland in the northern highlands of the country. They were forced to accept African self-government as of violent revolutions (Kenya in 1963, Southern Rhodesia in 1965 (now called Zimbabwe)).

Colonial Rule Limits Democracy

Beginning in the late 1950s, dozens of European colonies in Africa gained their independence and became nations. As in Latin America, the establishment of democracy in Africa proved difficult. In many cases, the newly independent nations faced a host of problems that slowed their progress toward democracy. The main reason for Africa’s difficulties was the negative impact of colonial rule. European powers had done little to prepare their African colonies for independence. The lingering effects of colonialism undermined efforts to build stable, democratic economies and states. This can be seen throughout Africa.

When Britain and France gave up their colonies, they left fragile democratic governments in place. Soon problems threatened those governments. Rival ethnic groups often fought for power. Strong militaries became tools for ambitious leaders. In many cases, a military dictatorship replaced democracy.

South Africa Under Apartheid

In South Africa, racial conflict was the result of colonial rule. From its beginnings under Dutch and British control, South Africa was racially divided. A small white minority ruled a large black majority. In 1910, South Africa gained self-rule as a dominion of the British Empire. In 1931, it became an independent member of the British Commonwealth. Although South Africa had a constitutional government, the constitution gave whites power and denied the black majority its rights.

Apartheid Segregates Society

In 1948, the National Party came to power in South Africa. This party promoted Afrikaner, or Dutch South African, nationalism. It also instituted a policy of apartheid, complete separation of the races. The minority government banned social contacts between whites and blacks. It established segregated schools, hospitals, and neighborhoods.



In 1959, the minority government set up reserves, called homelands, for the country's major black groups. Blacks were forbidden to live in white areas unless they worked as servants or laborers for whites. The homelands policy was totally unbalanced. Although blacks made up about 75 percent of the population, the government set aside only 13 percent of the land for them. Whites kept the best land.

Blacks Protest

The blacks of South Africa resisted the controls imposed by the white minority. In 1912, they formed the African National Congress (ANC) to fight for their rights. The ANC organized strikes and boycotts to protest racist policies. The government banned the ANC and imprisoned many of its members. One was ANC leader Nelson Mandela (man•DEHL•uh).

The troubles continued. In 1976, riots over school policies broke out in the black township of Soweto, leaving about 600 students dead. In 1977, police beat popular protest leader Stephen Biko to death while he was in custody. As protests mounted, the government declared a nationwide state of emergency in 1986.

Struggle for Democracy

By the late 1980s, South Africa was under great pressure to change. For years, a black South African bishop, Desmond Tutu, had led an economic campaign against apartheid. He asked foreign nations not to do business with South Africa. In response, many nations imposed trade restrictions. They also isolated South Africa in other ways, for example, by banning South Africa from the Olympic Games. (In 1984, Tutu won the Nobel Peace Prize for his nonviolent methods.)

In 1989, white South Africans elected a new president, F. W. de Klerk. His goal was to transform South Africa and end its isolation. In February 1990, he legalized the ANC and also released Nelson Mandela from prison.



These dramatic actions marked the beginning of a new era in South Africa. Over the next 18 months, the South African parliament repealed apartheid laws that had segregated public facilities and restricted land ownership by blacks. World leaders welcomed these changes and began to ease restrictions on South Africa.

Although some legal barriers had fallen, others would remain until a new constitution was in place. First, the country needed to form a multiracial government. After lengthy negotiations, President de Klerk agreed to hold South Africa's first universal elections, in which people of all races could vote, in April 1994. Nelson Mandela won the election.

In 1996, after much debate, South African lawmakers passed a new, more democratic constitution. It guaranteed equal rights for all citizens. The constitution included a bill of rights modeled on the U.S. Bill of Rights. The political changes that South Africa had achieved gave other peoples around the world great hope for the future of democracy.

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