

# Overview of the History of South Africa

Some 2 000 years ago, the Khoekhoen (the Hottentots of early European terminology) were pastoralists who had settled mostly along the coast, while the San (the Bushmen) were hunter-gatherers spread across the region. At this time, Bantu-speaking agropastoralists began arriving in southern Africa, spreading from the eastern lowlands to the Highveld.

At several archaeological sites there is evidence of sophisticated political and material cultures.

## European contact

The first European settlement in southern Africa was established by the Dutch East India Company in Table Bay (Cape Town) in 1652. Created to supply passing ships with fresh produce, the colony grew rapidly as Dutch farmers settled to grow crops. Shortly after the establishment of the colony, slaves were imported from East Africa, Madagascar and the East Indies.

The first British Settlers, known as the 1820 Settlers, arrived in Algoa Bay (now Nelson Mandela Bay) on board 21 ships, the first being the Chapman. They numbered about 4 500 and included artisans, tradesmen, religious leaders, merchants, teachers, bookbinders, blacksmiths, discharged sailors and soldiers, professional men and farmers.

## Conflict

From the 1770s, colonists came into contact and inevitable conflict with Bantu-speaking chiefdoms some 800 km east of Cape Town. A century of intermittent warfare ensued during which the colonists gained ascendancy over the isiXhosa-speaking chiefdoms.

In 1795, the British occupied the Cape as a strategic base against the French, controlling the sea route to the East.

In the 1820s, the celebrated Zulu leader, Shaka, established sway over a vast area of south-east Africa. As splinter Zulu groups conquered and absorbed communities in their path, the region experienced a fundamental disruption. Substantial states, such as Moshoeshoe's Lesotho and other Sotho-Tswana chiefdoms were established.

This temporary disruption of life on the Highveld served to facilitate the expansion northwards of the original Dutch settlers' descendants, the Boer Voortrekkers, from the 1830s.

## Occupation

In 1806, Britain reoccupied the Cape. As the colony prospered, the political rights of the various races were guaranteed, with slavery being abolished in 1838.



Throughout the 1800s, the boundaries of European influence spread eastwards. From the port of Durban, Natal settlers pushed northwards, further and further into the land of the Zulu. From the mid-1800s, the Voortrekkers coalesced in two land-locked white-ruled republics, the South African Republic (Transvaal) and the Orange Free State.



## The Mineral Revolution

South Africa's diamond mining industry dates back to 1867, when diamonds were discovered near Kimberley in what is today known as the Northern Cape. The Kimberley diamond fields, and later discoveries in Gauteng, the Free State, and along the Atlantic coast, emerged as major sources of gem-quality diamonds, securing South Africa's position as the world's leading producer in the mid-twentieth century.

## Gold

The discovery of the Witwatersrand goldfields in 1886 was a turning point in South Africa's history. The demand for franchise rights for English-speaking immigrants working on the new goldfields was the pretext Britain used to go to war with the Transvaal and Orange Free State in 1899.

The Anglo-Boer/South African War was the bloodiest, longest and most expensive war Britain engaged in between 1815 and 1915. It cost more than 200 million pounds and Britain lost more than 22 000 men. The Boers lost over 34 000 people and more than 15 000 black South Africans were killed.

## Union and Opposition

In 1910, the Union of South Africa was created out of the Cape, Natal, Transvaal and Free State. It was to be essentially a white union. Black opposition was inevitable, and the African National Congress (ANC) was founded in 1912 to protest the exclusion of black people from power. In 1921, the South African Communist Party was established at a time of heightened militancy. More discriminatory legislation was enacted. Meanwhile, Afrikaner nationalism, fueled by job losses arising from a worldwide recession, was on the march.

## The Rise of Apartheid

In 1948, the pro-Afrikaner National Party (NP) came to power with the ideology of apartheid, an even more rigorous and authoritarian approach than the previous segregationist policies. While white South Africa was cementing its power, black opposition politics were evolving. In 1943, a younger, more determined political grouping came to the fore with the launch of the ANC Youth League, a development, which was to foster the leadership of people such as Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, Oliver Tambo and Walter Sisulu.

## Repression

In 1961, the NP Government under Prime Minister HF Verwoerd declared South Africa a republic after winning a whites-only referendum. A new concern with racial purity was apparent in various legislation and residential segregation was enforced.

## Separate development

At a time when much of Africa was on the verge of independence, the South African Government was devising its policy of separate development, dividing the African population into artificial ethnic “nations,” each with its own “homeland” and the prospect of “independence.” Forced removals from “white” areas affected some 3,5 million people, and vast rural slums were created in the homelands.

In 1949, the ANC adopted its Program of Action, expressing the renewed militancy of the 1940s. The program embodied a rejection of white domination and a call for action in the form of protests, strikes and demonstrations.



## Defiance

The Defiance Campaign of the early 1950s carried mass mobilization to new heights under the banner of non-violent resistance to the pass laws. In 1955, the Freedom Charter was drawn up at the Congress of the People in Soweto. The charter enunciated the principles of the struggle, binding the movement to a culture of human rights and non-racialism.

Soon the mass-based organizations, including the ANC and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), were banned. Matters came to a head at Sharpeville in March 1960 when 69 PAC anti-pass demonstrators were killed.

A state of emergency was imposed, and detention without trial was introduced.

## Struggle days

Leaders of the black political organizations at this time either went into exile or were arrested. In this climate, the ANC and PAC abandoned their long-standing commitment to non-violent resistance and turned to armed struggle.

Top leaders still inside the country, including members of the ANC’s military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation), were arrested in 1963.



At the Rivonia Trial, eight ANC leaders, including Mr. Nelson Mandela, convicted of sabotage (instead of treason, the original charge), were sentenced to life imprisonment.

The resurgence of resistance politics in the early 1970s was dramatic. June 1976 marked the beginning of a sustained anti-apartheid revolt. School pupils in Soweto rose up against apartheid education, followed by youth uprisings throughout the country.

Strong, legal vehicles for the democratic forces tested the State, whose response until then had been invariably heavy-handed repression.

## **Reform**

Shaken by the scale of protest and opposition, the government embarked on a series of limited reforms in the early 1980s.

In 1983, the Constitution was reformed to allow the colored and Indian minorities limited participation in separate and subordinate houses of parliament.

In 1986, the pass laws were scrapped. The international community strengthened its support for the anti-apartheid cause.

Mass resistance increasingly challenged the apartheid State, which resorted to intensified repression accompanied by eventual recognition that apartheid could not be sustained.



## Apartheid's last days

Afrikaner élite openly started to pronounce in favor of a more inclusive society, with a number of businesspeople, students and academic leaders meeting publicly and privately with the ANC in exile.

Petty apartheid laws and symbols were openly challenged and eventually removed.

Together with a sliding economy, increasing internal dissent and international pressure, these developments inevitably led to historic changes and the fall of apartheid.

## Democratic Government

South Africa held its first democratic election in April 1994 under an interim Constitution. The ANC emerged with a 62% majority. South Africa was divided into nine new provinces to replace the four existing provinces and 10 black homelands. In terms of the interim Constitution, the NP and Inkatha Freedom Party participated in a government of national unity under President Mandela, South Africa's first democratically elected president.

The second democratic election, in 1999, saw the ANC increasing its majority to a point just short of two-thirds of the total vote.

In the April 2004 election, the ANC won the national vote with 69,68% and the celebration of 10 Years of Freedom attended by heads of state and government delegations from across the world.