

South Africa: Revolution at the Ballot Box

On an April day in 1994, they came by the tens of thousands. They formed lines that sometimes snaked for more than a mile. They waited patiently for two, five, even 12 hours. One handicapped woman came in a wheelbarrow pushed by relatives. Never allowed to vote before, black South Africans were voting for the first time in their lives.

The elections of April 1994 signaled a major breakthrough in South Africa. Political control was shifting from the white minority to the black majority. Only a few years ago, many observers of South Africa were predicting that only a bloody revolution could overturn the brutal white-controlled government. But in a remarkable turn of events, a black leader imprisoned for 26 years and a white leader willing to change worked together for a new South Africa.

White Minority Rule

Although always a minority in South Africa, whites have ruled this land since the first Dutch settlers arrived in the 1650s. In 1902, the British seized control of South Africa, defeating the Dutch settlers as well as the Zulus and other native African tribes. In 1910, the British officially made South Africa a colony in its empire.

From the beginning, white settlers denied the native African majority economic and political power. Only members of the white minority could vote and hold political office. After the British took control, white settlers drove blacks from the most productive lands.

By 1936, whites composed about 20 percent of the population of South Africa. The black majority, consisting of several African tribes, made up about 70 percent. The remaining 10 percent were immigrants from India and mixed-race persons, called “Coloureds.”

Following World War II, South Africa achieved independence along with other British colonies. In 1948, white voters put the National Party in control of the South African government. The National Party represented the Afrikaners, descendants of the early Dutch settlers. Afrikaners made up a majority of South African whites (but only 12 percent of the total population). The National Party clearly stated its purpose in one of its publications: “The preservation of the pure race tradition of the [Afrikaner people] must be protected at all costs in all possible ways as a holy pledge entrusted to us by our ancestors as part of God’s plan with our People.”

Over the next 40 years, the South African government, under the control of the Afrikaner National Party, pursued a policy of apartheid (uh PAR tide), which meant complete racial separation. As in the old American South, people of different races were required to use segregated train cars, buses, elevators, park benches, restrooms, restaurants, hotels, and a host of other public and private facilities. Interracial marriages and interracial sex were outlawed. Athletic teams were segregated and could not play against each other.

Unlike white children, black children were not required to attend school. When they did seek an education, black youngsters attended inferior schools with poorly trained teachers. These school children were also forced to learn the Afrikaner language (based on Dutch).



A segregated beach in South Africa.

Starting in the 1970s, the white South African government established tribal “homelands” in the poorest parts of the country. The government then deprived blacks of their South African citizenship and forced them to move to these homelands.

To work outside the homelands, African workers needed passes, which they had to carry at all times. In most cases, only single persons or married men received passes. So when workers left the homelands, they had to leave their families behind. Vast, racially segregated worker “townships” sprang up outside South Africa’s major cities. Many thousands of black workers, unable to secure a government pass, were arrested when they desperately sought jobs outside the economically depressed homelands.

Meanwhile, white South Africans lived well. They held all the best-paying jobs. Many worked in the large government bureaucracy, which granted preferences to Afrikaner-owned businesses, farms, and industries. A strong military and police force upheld the apartheid system.

The black majority suffered greatly under apartheid. With jobs scarce, most blacks lived in poverty. Massive housing shortages pushed blacks into crowded slums. High disease rates, little health care, and poor nutrition resulted in a life expectancy among blacks of 55 years, compared to 68.5 years among whites. Perhaps most importantly, since black South Africans were denied the right to vote, they possessed no political power to peacefully try to change things.



A South African worker shows the pass book that was required for work or travel.



A resettlement camp in Soweto outside Johannesburg.

Opposition to Apartheid

Since its beginning, *apartheid* had drawn opposition within South Africa. White opposition came mainly from English-speaking South Africans and young Afrikaners. The most important black organization opposing *apartheid* was the African National Congress (ANC).

The police and military, however, responded harshly to any opposition to the *apartheid* policies of the Afrikaner government. In the early 1950s, the ANC led a non-violent campaign against *apartheid*, but soon called it off after police arrested and imprisoned thousands of protesters. In 1960 in the black township of Sharpeville, the ANC organized a large protest over the inferior schooling of black children. Police fired into the crowd, killing 69 people.

Following Sharpeville, the government outlawed the ANC. The ANC then went underground and turned increasingly to armed revolutionary activities. One of its leaders, Nelson Mandela, a lawyer, was arrested and jailed many times. In 1964, he and several other ANC leaders were convicted of sabotage and treason and sentenced to life in prison.

But the cycle of black protest and white government repression continued. In 1976, black school children in Soweto, a worker township outside of Johannesburg, began demonstrating against the required use of the Afrikaner language in their schools. When the protests grew, the government cracked down harshly, killing hundreds, including 134 people under the age of 18. Anti-*apartheid* boycotts, strikes, demonstrations (some violent), sabotage, and almost daily clashes with the police continued into the 1980s.

In 1984, the Afrikaner government decided to include Indian and Coloured South Africans in the political process. A new constitution established a three-house parliament. But white representatives held the majority of seats and blacks were still totally excluded.

By this time, the world community was taking steps to pressure the *apartheid* regime to change. South Africa was banned from the Olympic Games. An increasing number of nations, including the United States, applied economic sanctions, which placed severe restrictions on trade and investment in South Africa.

In addition to international pressure and the growing political violence within South Africa, another factor weakened the will of the white minority to hold on to power: The percentage of whites was shrinking. At its peak, the white minority composed only 21 percent of the population. By the end of the 1980s, this figure had dropped to 14 percent. By the year 2005, it would slip to a mere 10 percent. How much longer could such a small group hope to dominate, even by force, the ever-increasing numbers of black South Africans? Realistic white South African leaders could see the handwriting on the wall. One of these leaders was Frederik Willem (F. W.) de Klerk.

The End of Apartheid

F. W. de Klerk became the president of South Africa in 1989. An attorney like Nelson Mandela, de Klerk realized that South Africa had to change. Although many whites still supported *apartheid*, de Klerk worked to dismantle it. In 1990, he released Nelson Mandela from prison and started negotiating with him and the ANC on the transfer of political power from the white minority to the black majority. The ANC, in turn, abandoned its support for armed revolution.

The following year, de Klerk and Mandela reached an agreement. White-minority rule would end without bloodshed. South Africa would hold its first all-race elections. The



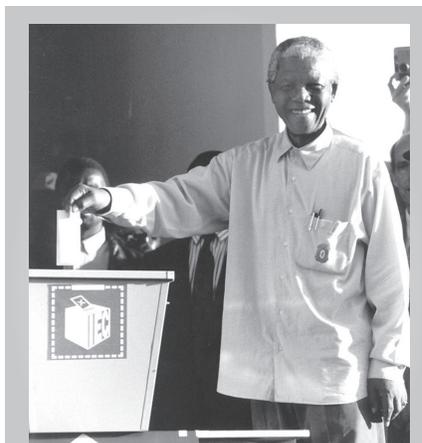
Millions of South Africans waited for hours to vote in their first all-race elections in 1994.

parliament created by these elections would then have five years to write a new constitution for South Africa. Both de Klerk and Mandela were awarded the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize for their achievement.

Although De Klerk and Mandela received broad support for their power-sharing agreement, some South Africans vowed to resist it. One group, the Afrikaner Resistance Movement, demanded a white-only homeland to be created by armed force, if necessary. Similarly, the black Inkatha Freedom Party held out for an independent Zulu province.

On the eve of the all-race elections in April 1994, South Africa was torn by fear, political violence, and divisions within both the white and black communities. But, over the four days that the elections took place, peace prevailed. Nearly 23 million people aged 18 and over voted, including 17 million black South Africans voting for the first time. On the first day of voting, Nelson Mandela remarked, "Today is like no other before it. Voting in our first free and fair election has begun. Today marks the dawn of our freedom."

The ANC gained control of the national parliament with 63 percent of the vote. The parliament then chose Nelson Mandela as the new president of South Africa. De Klerk's National Party won 20 percent



Former political prisoner Nelson Mandela cast his first ballot during the 1994 elections.

of the vote, assuring him one of the deputy president positions.

At his presidential inauguration on May 10, 1994, Nelson Mandela, age 75, pleaded for unity among the racial groups that had been so bitterly divided during the decades of *apartheid*:

We understand there is no easy road to freedom. We must therefore act together as a united people, for national reconciliation, for nation building, for the birth of a new world.

The black majority government headed by President Mandela faced enormous challenges. The Mandela government was confronted with a black majority suffering from a dearth of land, jobs, education, housing, health care, and nutritious food. In June 1996, Mandela's government introduced a strategy in response to the economic problems facing the nation. Called "Growth, Employment and Redistribution," this strategy sought to encourage open markets, privatization, and a favorable investment climate through tariff reduction, subsidies, tax incentives, and increased services to the

disadvantaged.

Nelson Mandela retired from office in June 1999. The new government must continue to address several important problems, including an exodus of educated white South Africans and a severe crime problem. Furthermore, the December 1996 constitution must be fully implemented. But all of these things are now possible because of the vision of Nelson Mandela and F. W. de Klerk along with the millions of voters who brought about a revolution at the ballot box.

For Discussion and Writing

1. In what ways did the black majority suffer under *apartheid*?
2. Why do you think the white minority leadership of South Africa gave up political control of the country to the black majority?
3. What do you think is the single most important challenge facing the new South Africa? Why?

ACTIVITY

The South African Bill of Rights

South Africans recently wrote a new constitution. The new constitution includes a bill of rights. Listed below are a few provisions of the new bill of rights. Form small groups to discuss these provisions and to recommend whether or not South Africans should have included them in their bill of rights. Your recommendation for each provision should include a list of reasons for your decision. Minority views expressed during your group's discussion should also be noted. Prepare to make an oral report on your recommendations.

1. "Everyone has the right to life [and the death penalty is hereby abolished]."
2. "Everyone has the right to freedom of expression [but this right does not extend to] . . . propaganda for war, incitement of imminent violence, or advocacy of hatred that is based on race, ethnicity, gender or religion, and that constitutes incitement to cause harm."
3. "Everyone has the right to freedom and security of the person, which includes the right not to be deprived of freedom arbitrarily or without just cause, the right not to be detained without trial, the right to be free from all forms of violence from either public or private sources, the right not to be tortured in any way, and the right not to be treated or punished in a cruel, inhuman or degrading way."
4. "Everyone has the right to have access to health care services. . . ."
5. "Everyone has the right to a basic education, including adult basic education."
6. "Everyone has the right to have access to health care services, including reproductive health care, sufficient food and water, and social security, including, if they are unable to support themselves and their dependants, appropriate social assistance."

Race and Voting in the Segregated South

After returning home from World War II, veteran Medgar Evers decided to vote in a Mississippi election. But when he and some other black ex-servicemen attempted to vote, a white mob stopped them. "All we wanted to be was ordinary citizens," Evers later related. "We fought during the war for America, Mississippi included. Now, after the Germans and Japanese hadn't killed us, it looked as though the white Mississippians would. . . ."

The most basic right of a citizen in a democracy is the right to vote. Without this right, people can be easily ignored and even abused by their government. This, in fact, is what happened to African American citizens living in the South following Civil War Reconstruction. Despite the 14th and 15th amendments guaranteeing the civil rights of black Americans, their right to vote was systematically taken away by white supremacist state governments.

Voting During Reconstruction

After the Civil War, Congress acted to prevent Southerners from re-establishing white supremacy. In 1867, the Radical Republicans in Congress imposed federal military rule over most of the South. Under United States Army occupation, the former Confederate states wrote new constitutions and were readmitted to the Union, but only after ratifying the 14th Amendment. This Reconstruction amendment prohibited states from denying "the equal protection of the laws" to United States citizens, which included the former slaves.

In 1870, the 15th Amendment was ratified. It stated that, "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude."

More than a half-million black men became voters in the South during the 1870s (women did not secure the right to vote in the United States until

1920). For the most part, these new black voters cast their ballots solidly for the Republican Party, the party of the Great Emancipator, Abraham Lincoln.

When Mississippi rejoined the Union in 1870, former slaves made up more than half of that state's population. During the next decade, Mississippi sent two black United States senators to Washington and elected a number of black state officials, including a lieutenant governor. But even though the new black citizens voted freely and in large numbers, whites were still elected to a large majority of state and local offices. This was the pattern in most of the Southern states during Reconstruction.

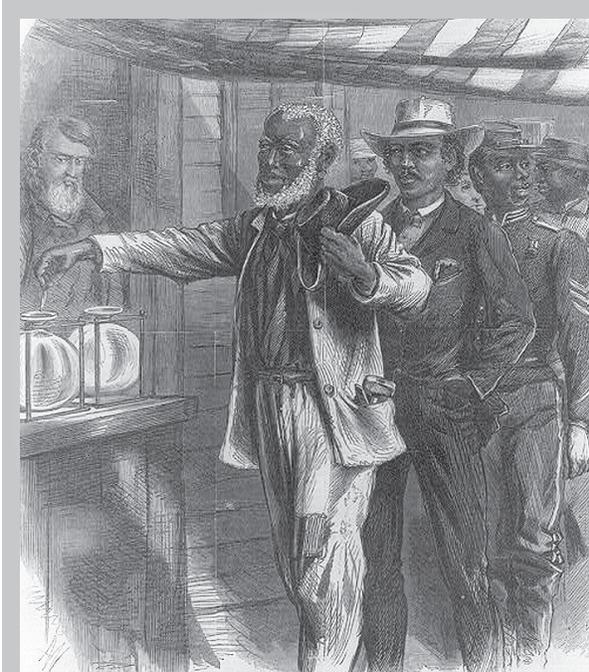
The Republican-controlled state governments in the South were hardly perfect. Many citizens complained about overtaxation and outright corruption. But these governments brought about significant improvements in the lives of the former slaves. For the first time, black men and women enjoyed freedom of speech and movement, the right of a fair trial, education for their children, and all the other privileges and protections of American citizenship. But all this changed when Reconstruction ended in 1877 and federal troops withdrew from the old Confederacy.

Voting in Mississippi

With federal troops no longer present to protect the rights of black citizens, white supremacy quickly returned to the old Confederate states. Black voting fell off sharply in most areas because of threats by white employers and violence from the Ku Klux Klan, a ruthless secret organization bent on preserving white supremacy at all costs.



"The Freedmen's Bureau"
Harper's Weekly, 1868



"The First Vote"
Harper's Weekly, 1867

White majorities began to vote out the Republicans and replace them with Democratic governors, legislators, and local officials. Laws were soon passed banning interracial marriages and racially segregating railroad cars along with the public schools.

Laws and practices were also put in place to make sure blacks would never again freely participate in elections. But one problem stood in the way of denying African Americans the right to vote: the 15th Amendment, which guaranteed them this right. To a great extent, Mississippi led the way in overcoming the barrier presented by the 15th Amendment.

In 1890, Mississippi held a convention to write a new state constitution to replace the one in force since Reconstruction. The white leaders of the convention were clear about their intentions. "We came here to exclude the Negro," declared the convention president. Because of the 15th Amendment, they could not ban blacks from voting. Instead, they wrote into the state constitution a number of voter restrictions making it difficult for most blacks to register to vote.

First, the new constitution required an annual poll tax, which voters had to pay for two years before the election. This was a difficult economic burden

to place on black Mississippians, who made up the poorest part of the state's population. Many simply couldn't pay it.

But the most formidable voting barrier put into the state constitution was the literacy test. It required a person seeking to register to vote to read a section of the state constitution and explain it to the county clerk who processed voter registrations. This clerk, who was always white, decided whether a citizen was literate or not.

The literacy test did not just exclude the 60 percent of voting-age black men (most of them ex-slaves) who could not read. It excluded almost all black men, because the clerk would select complicated technical passages for them to interpret. By contrast, the clerk would pass whites by picking simple sentences in the state constitution for them to explain.

Mississippi also enacted a "grandfather clause" that permitted registering anyone whose grandfather was qualified to vote before the Civil War. Obviously, this benefited only white citizens. The "grandfather clause" as well as the other legal barriers to black voter registration worked. Mississippi cut the percentage of black voting-age men registered to vote from over 90 percent during Reconstruction to less than 6 percent in 1892. These measures were copied by most of the other states in the South.

Other Forms of Voter Discrimination

By the turn of the century, the white Southern Democratic Party held nearly all elected offices in the former Confederate states. The Southern Republican Party, mostly made up of blacks, barely existed and rarely even ran candidates against the Democrats. As a result, the real political contests took place within the Democratic Party primary elections. Whoever won the Democratic primary was just about guaranteed victory in the general election.

In 1902, Mississippi passed a law that declared political parties to be private organizations outside the authority of the 15th Amendment. This permitted the Mississippi Democratic Party to exclude black citizens from membership and participation in its primaries. The "white primary," which was soon imitated in most other Southern states, effectively prevented the small number of

blacks registered to vote from having any say in who got elected to partisan offices — from the local sheriff to the governor and members of Congress.

When poll taxes, literacy tests, “grandfather clauses,” and “white primaries” did not stop blacks from registering and voting, intimidation often did the job. An African-American citizen attempting to exercise his right to vote would often be threatened with losing his job. Denial of credit, threats of eviction, and verbal abuse by white voting clerks also prevented black Southerners from voting. When all else failed, mob violence and even lynching kept black people away from the ballot box.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965

As a result of intimidation, violence, and racial discrimination in state voting laws, a mere 3 percent of voting-age black men and women in the South were registered to vote in 1940. In Mississippi, under 1 percent were registered. Most blacks who did vote lived in the larger cities of the South.

By not having the power of the ballot, African Americans in the South had little influence in their communities. They did not hold elected offices. They had no say in how much their taxes would be or what laws would be passed. They had little, if any, control over local police, courts, or public schools. They, in effect, were denied their rights as citizens.

Attempts to change this situation were met with animosity and outright violence. But in the 1950s, the civil rights movement developed. Facing enormous hostility, black people in the South organized to demand their rights guaranteed in the United States Constitution. They launched voter registration drives in many Southern communities.

In the early 1960s, black and white protesters, called Freedom Riders, came from the North to join in demonstrations throughout the South. In some places, crowds attacked them while white police officers looked on.

Medgar Evers, the black veteran stopped by a white mob from voting, became a civil rights



Freedom Riders Bus Burned near Anniston, Alabama, 1961

leader in his native Mississippi. Because of his civil rights activities, he was shot and killed in front of his home by a white segregationist in 1963.

But through the efforts of local civil rights leaders like Medgar Evers and other Americans, about 43 percent of adult black men and women were registered to vote in the South by 1964. That same year, the 24th Amendment was ratified. It outlawed poll taxes in federal elections. (The United States Supreme Court later ruled that all poll taxes are unconstitutional.)

White supremacists, however, still fiercely resisted voting by African Americans. Black voter registration in Alabama was only 23 percent, while in neighboring Mississippi less than 7 percent of voting-age blacks were registered.

A major event in the civil rights movement soon brought an end to voting discrimination. Early in 1965, a county sheriff clamped down on a black voter registration campaign in Selma, Alabama. Deputies arrested and jailed protesting black teachers and 800 schoolchildren. The leaders of the voter registration drive decided to organize a protest march from Selma to Montgomery, the capital of Alabama.

On March 7, 1965, about 600 black and white civil rights protesters passed through Selma and began to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge spanning the Alabama River. They were met on the other side by a large force of Alabama state troopers, who ordered the marchers to



Civil rights protesters march over the Pettus Bridge toward troopers in Selma, Alabama. March 7, 1965.

return to Selma. When the marchers refused to turn back, the troopers attacked, some on horseback, knocking down people and beating them with clubs. This was all filmed by TV news cameras and shown that evening to a shocked American public.

The Selma march pushed the federal government to pass legislation to enforce the right of black citizens to vote. A few days after the violence at Selma, President Lyndon Johnson introduced the Voting Rights Act of 1965 before a joint session of Congress. Johnson declared, “it is not just Negroes, but it’s really all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice.”

The Voting Rights Act, signed into law by President Johnson on August 6, 1965, suspended literacy and other tests in counties and states showing evidence of voter discrimination. These counties and states also were prohibited from creating new voter requirements that denied citizens their right to vote. Moreover, in the areas covered by the act, federal examiners replaced local clerks in registering voters.

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 ended the practices that had denied African Americans the right to vote in Southern states. Registration of black voters in the South jumped from 43 percent in 1964 to 66 percent by the end of the decade. This represented an increase of more than a million new African American voters who could finally claim their right to vote.

For Discussion and Writing

1. What legal devices did Southern states use to exclude most of their black citizens from voting? What other methods were used to stop blacks from voting?
2. What was unfair about the way literacy tests were used for voter registration in the South from 1890 to 1965?
3. What were the consequences to African Americans of being excluded from voting in the segregated South?

ACTIVITY

Who Should Not Vote?

All states have some voting restrictions. Are they necessary? At the right are five traditional restrictions on the right to vote. Form small groups to decide whether your state should retain each of these restrictions. Before making a decision on each restriction, the group should discuss and write answers to these two questions:

1. What are some reasons favoring the restriction?
2. What are some reasons against the restriction?

After the groups have finished their work, each restriction should be discussed and voted on by the entire class.

Restrictions on the Right to Vote

In order to vote, you must...

- A. Reside in a voting district for at least one month.**
- B. Be at least 18 years of age.**
- C. Not be in prison or on parole for a felony conviction.**
- D. Be a United States citizen.**
- E. Register to vote.**