Epilogue: Becoming South Africa

In December 1961 the president of the ANC, Chief Albert Luthuli, accepted the Nobel Peace Prize for his nonviolent struggle against apartheid. The government let him out of South Africa to attend the ceremony in Norway fearing that not to do so would cause a world outcry. In his speech he commented on the long history of peaceful protest of Africans all over the continent against white rule.

> ***"We, in our situation, have chosen the path of non-violence of our own volition…. All the strength of progressive leadership in South Africa, all my life and strength, has been given to the pursuance of this method, in an attempt to avert disaster."***
>
> —Chief Luthuli, December 11, 1961

What decision did the ANC come to regarding the use of violence?

Five days later Umkhonto we Sizwe ("Spear of the Nation" in Zulu, also called MK) announced its existence through the dissemination of a flyer.

> ***"The time comes in the life of any nation when there remain only two choices: submit or fight. That time has now come to South Africa. We shall not submit and we have no choice but to hit back by all means within our power in defense of our people, our future, and our freedom."***
>
> —MK flyer, issued December 16, 1961

In June 1961, in secret, underground meetings, the leadership of the ANC had decided to launch sabotage campaigns against the government. This was one part of a broader strategy that also included mass nonviolent action as well as advocating sanctions against the government and diplomatic isolation from the world community. The sabotage campaigns would be organized by a new group, MK, led by Nelson Mandela. MK was the armed wing of the ANC, but that connection was not to be made public in order to protect ANC members from further jeopardy. Additionally, while Luthuli most likely knew of this shift in ANC policy to include the use of violence as one of the four pillars in the struggle, it is not clear whether he condoned it. He, in particular, was shielded from connections to MK. Headquarters for MK were at a secluded house (paid for partly by the Communist Party) in Rivonia, a white suburb of Johannesburg.

On December 16th, the anniversary of the Battle of Blood River, MK used small bombs to damage administrative offices in Port Elizabeth, Johannesburg, and Durban. One saboteur was killed by his own bomb in the attacks. Over the following eighteen months MK launched about two hundred attacks on symbols of white domination such as jails and railways.

How was the PAC's decision different?

The Pan Africanist Congress had simultaneously designed its own militant wing, called Poqo, which means "pure" or "independent" in Xhosa. Poqo was not as centrally organized as MK, and the group had no identifiable leader. Unlike MK, Poqo practiced guerrilla tactics, targeting both whites and black collaborators.

> ***"The white people shall suffer, the black people will rule. Freedom comes after bloodshed. Poqo has started."***
>
> —Poqo leaflet issued in December 1961

Poqo was successful in causing widespread intimidation and fear among whites because of its random attacks. For example, Poqo was responsible for the hacking to death of five whites, including two young girls, who were camping near a river in 1963. Poqo also killed several police officers.

What method did the SAIC adopt?

Although some members of the SAIC joined MK, the official position of the organization held true to its original founder, Gandhi, and his peaceful protest stance. The SAIC called on the international community to take a stand against racial discrimination in South Africa, and it refused to cooperate with any of the government's segregationist policies—even those not related to Indians.

> ***"Both in the international and national fields we stand for peace and for peaceful solution of the problems which beset humanity."***
>
> —SAIC presidential address, September 1961

What was the Rivonia Trial?

In response to the sabotage and guerrilla tactics now employed by some Africans, the government issued new laws that allowed for more arrests and detentions. The Sabotage Act of 1962 gave the government power to arrest anyone it believed threatened the security of the country. The following year the 90-Day Act allowed the government to detain people without charges or trials for up to ninety days. Following that time, individuals could be released for a few moments, then detained again for an additional ninety days, and so on. Detainees had no rights of access to lawyers or to their families. The South African government was rapidly becoming a police state. Hundreds of ANC and PAC members were arrested, including Nelson Mandela. Some of those arrested were subjected to torture, including electric shocks, beatings, and suffocation in plastic bags. The government tended to torture white protesters less frequently than blacks.

The police surprised several members of the ANC as they were looking over a proposal in their Rivonia headquarters in July 1963. The documents the police found—many of which were right on the table as they entered the house—doomed the ANC leadership. Nine people, including Nelson Mandela, were tried in the Rivonia Trial. The accused admitted that they were involved in sabotage and that they had been investigating the possibility of guerrilla warfare.

> ***"During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people…. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and which I hope to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."***
>
> —Nelson Mandela, in the courtroom

On June 12, 1964, Mandela and seven others were sentenced to life in prison. Key leaders of both the ANC and PAC were now in prison or exile, and the organizations lost some effectiveness.

The UN Security Council urged the South African government to grant amnesty to the defendants, and considered the use of sanctions against South Africa to push the country to dismantle the apartheid system. But for the remainder of the 1960s and into the 1970s, the authoritarianism of the government merely increased. Raids continued, individuals were detained, and the international community's disapproval seemed to do little to change the entrenchment of the apartheid system.

Entrenchment

With the anti-apartheid leadership mostly in jail or in exile, a new generation of protesters emerged. Many of them believed that a critical piece of the struggle against apartheid was to change the mindset of the masses. Generations of formal segregation, discrimination, and oppression had made the majority of Africans feel powerless. New leaders wanted to help people believe in their own ability to change the future.

What was Black Consciousness?

Foremost among them was Steve Biko, who founded the Black Consciousness Movement. This social and political movement was inspired in part by the Black Power movement in the United States. Black Consciousness pressed for increased rights and an end to "separate development" without the help of

whites. Whites were excluded from Black Consciousness activities because the movement was trying to demonstrate to blacks, coloureds, and Indians that they could succeed on their own power.

> ***"As long as we go to Whitey begging cap in hand for our own emancipation, we are giving him further sanction to continue with his racist and oppressive system…. [We] need to rally together… and to operate as a group to rid [ourselves] of the shackles that bind [us] to perpetual servitude…. The philosophy of Black Consciousness… expresses group pride and the determination of the black to rise and attain the envisaged self…. The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed."***
>
> —Steve Biko

Black Consciousness succeeded in winning many followers, primarily young people. The movement was banned in 1977. Its members eventually dissipated or joined other radical groups.

How did worldwide economic and political shifts change the apartheid system?

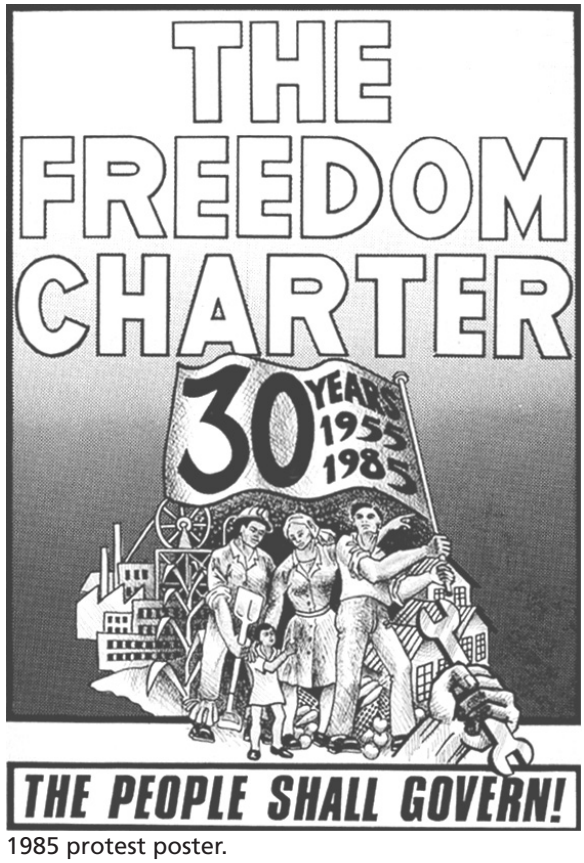
As machinery in the industrial businesses of South Africa required more skilled workers, companies found that there were simply not enough white workers available. Blacks, coloureds, and Asians began to fill those positions. In time, despite the fact that no legal means to organize were available to blacks, their status and responsibility in the industrial sector grew. The government began to realize that its economic success depended not just on white workers, but also on the happiness and well-being of a growing group of skilled black, coloured, and Asian workers.

Independence movements in other southern and central African countries changed the political landscape as well. Following the departure of white rulers from Mozambique and Angola, South Africa became virtually surrounded by black regimes. African guerrillas in the ANC and PAC could plan and make attacks on South Africa from these countries.

What happened in Soweto?

Within South Africa, people living in the townships of large cities were becoming increasingly frustrated by their situation. High school students in Soweto (the SOuth WEst TOwnship of Johannesburg) were angered that their schools lacked materials and teachers adequate to their needs. They also protested the policy of Afrikaans as one of the languages of instruction. The idea that they had to learn Afrikaans—spoken nowhere else in the world—in order to function in math, science, and history classes angered them.

In June 1976 Soweto students staged a massive demonstration against Afrikaans instruction. The government responded with an armed force. But the riots spread among



1985 protest poster.

students from all over central South Africa. Over the next several months teenagers ran at police who were firing guns at them. Many were arrested and tortured, sometimes killed, in prisons. In the end, close to six hundred people were killed and nearly twenty-five hundred injured.

In response to their dire situation, many young people left the townships for Mozambique, where they trained as guerrillas with the banned ANC. South Africa was in a state of crisis.

A year after the Soweto uprising, Steve Biko, the leader of Black Consciousness, died in prison, a victim of torture. Although the police denied it initially, Biko's head had been repeatedly bashed into a wall, and his near-dead body was driven in a police van for over seven hundred miles, ostensibly to the hospital. News of Biko's death and continued desperate conditions angered the black, coloured, and Indian communities. Many participated in anti-government protests that became increasingly violent.

Why did the failing economy make the apartheid system difficult to maintain?

The South African police and military forces could not keep up with the demands of their daily routines. South Africa illegally occupied South West Africa (now Namibia), and it was also militarily involved in Angola. This overextension forced the government to initiate reforms in the apartheid system to keep it functioning. There were not enough white recruits to fulfill the needs of the police forces, so the government grudgingly began to recruit blacks. Defense spending grew astronomically. The huge numbers of able-bodied people in the security forces left significant holes in the civilian economy.

Additionally, semi-skilled black workers were now needed in large numbers to support the industrial sector of the economy. These workers needed to be adequately educated.

Finally, in the 1980s black trade unions provided much of the structure for protesting apartheid. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), along with other groups, became central to the political struggle. The unions organized strikes and provided platforms for mass action. All of these issues made apartheid difficult to maintain, which made the government clamp down more tightly in an attempt to keep control.

How did violence increase in the 1980s?

More peaceful protests led to more black deaths, and the government declared a State of Emergency in 1985. Many people openly carried ANC banners as they marched through the streets, although the ANC was still banned. The protests were not just against the government but also against black "conspirators" who had joined the police forces. Often these "betrayers" were killed in a gruesome fashion known as "necklacing": protesters would place car tires filled with gasoline around their bodies and burn them to death.

Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) also engaged in more attacks in the 1980s, including against "soft" targets like bus stations and restaurants. But these bombings did not incite people to rise up. The government reacted with further repression and encouraged vigilante action on the part of black collaborators. These "black-on-black" crimes, instigated by the police, were often used as an excuse for more police presence and increased restriction. Thousands of people were placed in detention. The country seemed headed toward civil war.

Liberation

The violence of the State of Emergency led nations around the world, including the United States, to impose limited sanctions on South Africa. The worldwide oil and arms embargo prevented South Africa from importing those products legally, although the country continued to do so illegally. Some countries, including the United States, refused to buy certain products, such as gold, from South Africa. Although South Africa was able to circumvent many sanctions, the country's racist policies were clearly isolating it from the world.

While violence, detention, and police brutality continued, the South African economy, as a result of the sanctions and its own defense spending, began to crumble. The combined force of the four pillars of the ANC's strategy—mass action, sabotage, sanctions, and diplomatic isolation—was finally becoming effective.

In August 1989, a new South African president assumed power. F.W. de Klerk was known as a conservative, but his understanding of the need for modifications in light of the worsening economic system led him to make significant changes. He believed that the massive rioting indicated apartheid was no longer viable.

To the surprise of many around the world, de Klerk unconditionally released Nelson Mandela from prison on February 11, 1990, twenty-seven years after he had entered. At the same time, de Klerk unbanned the various anti-apartheid groups, and agreed to talks with leaders from all racial groups to develop a post-apartheid government system in South Africa.

"We would all like Mr. Mandela's release to take place in a dignified and orderly manner."

—F.W. de Klerk, on the eve of Mandela's release

"Our resort to the armed struggle in 1960 [sic] with the formation of the military wing of the ANC, Umkhonto we Sizwe, was a purely defensive action against the violence of apartheid.... We express the hope that a climate conducive to a negotiated settlement will be created soon so that there may no longer be the need for the armed struggle."

—Nelson Mandela, at his release

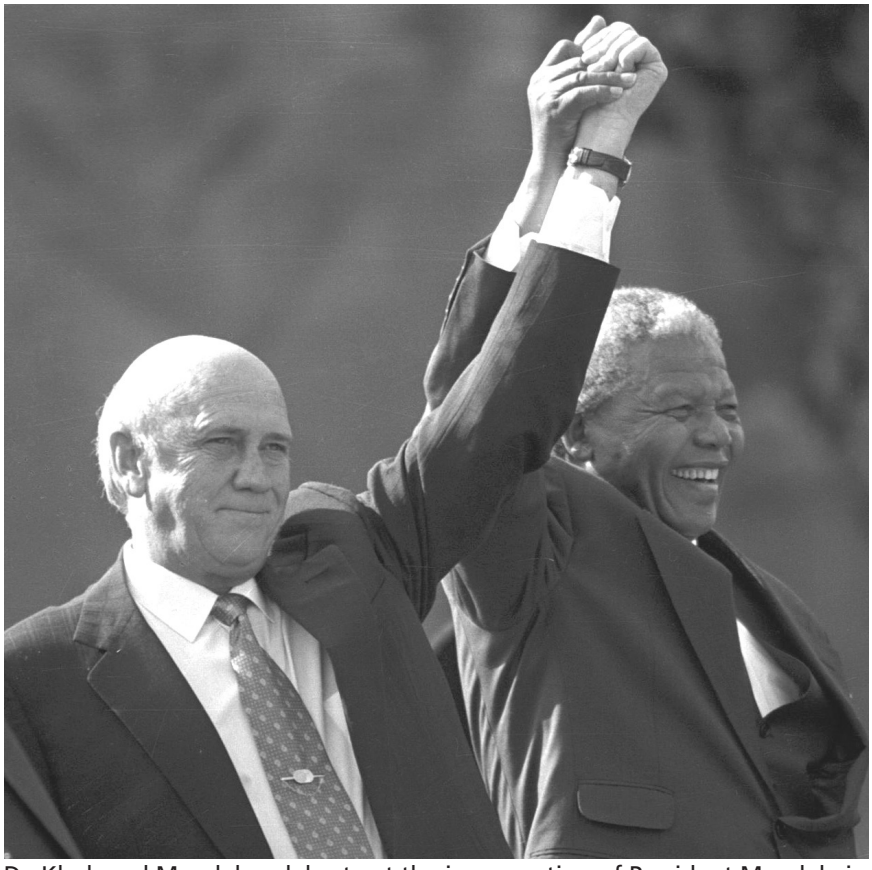
While Mandela's release offered liberal South Africans great hope, the problem of radical young people was becoming clear. Many of these teenagers and young adults had little schooling, were bitter about their situation, and wanted immediate change. Meanwhile, the State of Emergency continued for several months. But by the fall of 1990, most public areas were becoming desegregated. In February 1991, de Klerk removed key apartheid laws from the books.

Following the release of Mandela and the repeal of apartheid laws, political violence in South Africa continued. Various groups tried to gain power in the transition, sometimes fueling old fires. In fact, conflict continued for an additional four years as leaders met to negotiate the future of the country. The negotiations were lengthy and difficult.

They were also marred by actions of the government. For instance, security forces supported—both militarily and financially—a primarily Zulu anti-apartheid

Reuters/Dufka.

Voters wait for hours in line at the 1994 elections in Soweto.



Reuters/Ngwenya.

De Klerk and Mandela celebrate at the inauguration of President Mandela in 1994.

organization called the Inkatha Freedom Party, which engaged in violent conflicts with the ANC. Such action on the part of the government increased the ANC's suspicions. Others, such as the PAC, were impatient for change, and accused the ANC of "selling out."

Post-Apartheid South Africa

Finally, government and anti-apartheid leaders reached a tenuous solution. As a result of the negotiations, the political organizations agreed to the formation of a new constitution. This constitution is now one of the most democratic constitutions in the world. It explicitly protects members of all races, ethnic groups, religions, sexual orientations, and of both genders. All political parties took part in its construction, and in 1994 new voting rights allowed blacks, coloureds, Asians, and whites to cast ballots together for the first time. ANC leader Nelson Mandela was elected president.

In 1993 the Nobel Peace Prize was jointly awarded to Mandela and de Klerk for their parts in ending apartheid.

What was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission?

Part of the constitution called for the formation of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC was made up of people of all races who would oversee the investigation of violent acts, the punishment of perpetrators, and the payment of reparations to victims of apartheid or anti-apartheid violence. Both apartheid supporters and opponents appeared before the commission to explain how they or their families were victimized, or how they had used violent means to support their cause.

> ***"We are charged to unearth the truth about our dark past, to lay the ghosts of that past so that they will not return to haunt us.... [W]e will thereby contribute to the healing of a traumatised and wounded people... and in this way to promote national unity and reconciliation."***
>
> —Archbishop Desmund Tutu,
> TRC Chairman

Many people were grateful to be able to tell the commission what had happened to them or their families, as they felt no one had listened to their stories before.

During the TRC many South Africans learned for the first time of the horrific tactics used by the government to eliminate apartheid opponents, particularly in the 1980s. People

learned that political prisoners had been regularly gang raped, electrocuted, pushed out of windows to their deaths, and slowly poisoned. Young men were lured into vans with promises of attending political meetings, and the vans were set alight. In some cases, police admitted to burning the bodies of their victims in barbecue pits while they cooked their dinner and drank their beer on the side. The government also used biological and chemical weapons against activists, including releasing cholera bacteria into the water systems of some towns.

One controversial element of the commission enabled perpetrators to receive amnesty for their acts if they could prove that what they had done was politically motivated and in line with the perceived needs of either the apartheid or anti-apartheid movement. Applicants also had to reveal the truth of their actions before live audiences, often facing the victims and victims' families. In many cases the families learned for the first time during the hearings of how their relatives died and where they were buried. Much of the TRC was broadcast on national TV. While it proved to be healing for many South Africans, it was disturbing for others.

"I felt what...has brought my eyesight back is to come back here and tell this story.... I feel what has been making me sick all this time is the fact that I couldn't tell my story.

—Lukas Sikwepere, who lost his sight to a police gunshot wound

"The Commission, with its quest for truth, has not healed my wounds. It has opened ones I never knew I had."

—Phylicia Oppelt, newspaper reporter

The TRC heard cases for three years, and issued its initial report in 1998. Since then, South Africa has been working to come to terms with its past and embrace its multiracial future. In 2003, then-President Thabo Mbeki announced that over nineteen thousand families who had testified before the TRC would receive reparations payments. Many families think the $3,900 payment is too little.

South Africa has had three successful presidential elections since 1994 and the ANC has remained firmly in control of the government. The country has taken on a political leadership role in southern Africa. It also has maintained the strongest economy on the continent.

But South Africa's political transformation has not yet been matched by an economic one. The economic legacy of apartheid persists so that, on the whole, blacks remain much poorer than whites, and continue to struggle to make ends meet. Unemployment is high and many blacks still have inadequate housing. Promises of land reform—which would return land to blacks dispossessed decades earlier—have, for the most part, not yet been met. In addition, the country continues to battle high levels of crime as well as an HIV/AIDS crisis. South Africa's leaders have recognized these challenges as top priorities for the coming years.

"We've learned to look at each other's eyes here. Otherwise you can't get a country. We're not South Africa yet. We're becoming South Africa."

—Justice Albie Sachs