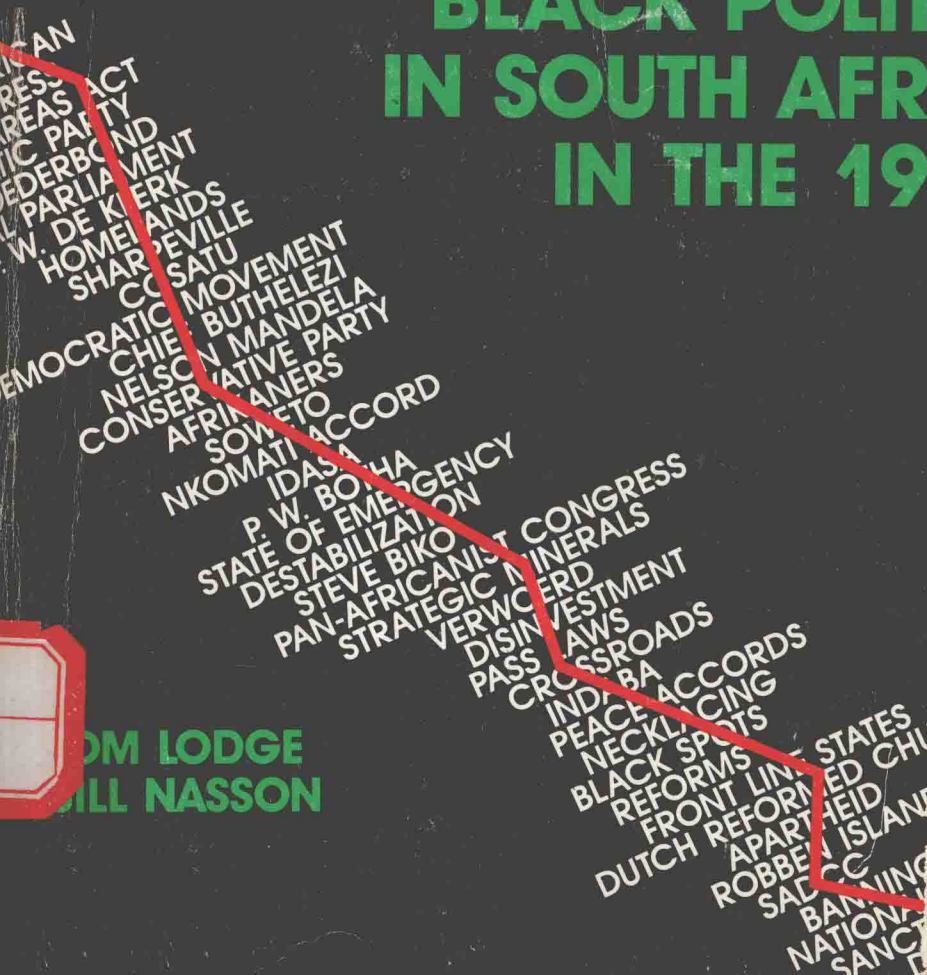
UPDATE

# SOUTH AFRICA: TIME RUNNING OUT

# ALL, HERE, AND NOW: BLACK POLITICS IN SOUTH AFRICA IN THE 1980s





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# ALL, HERE, AND NOW: BLACK POLITICS IN SOUTH AFRICA IN THE 1980s

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# PREFACE

In 1981 the Study Commission on U.S. Policy Toward Southern Africa, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and chaired by Franklin A. Thomas, published a report on the results of a two-year study. The report, entitled *South Africa: Time Running Out (SATRO),* contained an extensive review of South Africa's history, people, economy, and social and political systems; a survey of South Africa's relations with its neighbors and the rest of the world; and interviews with South Africans across racial, religious, and economic lines. The book concluded with an analysis of U.S. interests in South Africa and laid out a framework for U.S. policy in southern Africa, with specific objectives and actions for U.S. public and private groups. *SATRO* has been reprinted and has become a seminal teaching and reference resource. It is probably still the most comprehensive treatment of South Africa and U.S. policy available.

Since 1981 events have moved swiftly in southern Africa. South Africa's political landscape has been transformed by a combination of internal and external pressures, the most important being a black rebellion of unprecedented scope, intensity, and duration. South Africa's neighbors in the region paid a high price in human suffering and economic dislocation as the result of Pretoria's destabilization policy and their own internal conflicts. But they also had the satisfaction of seeing both the achievement of independence by Namibia, Africa's last colony, and the initiation of a genuine dialogue between blacks and whites in South Africa itself. The international climate changed significantly, with the superpowers cooperating on regional issues, thus effectively ending the cold war in southern Africa. In the United States, southern Africa's increased importance was

reflected in the controversy it aroused as a domestic issue and in its new prominence on the foreign policy agenda.

Many parts of *SATRO* have become dated, although others, particularly the policy section, remain relevant. It was therefore decided to update the work with a series of publications covering the 1980s. The intention of the series is to produce a comprehensive journal of record and an analytical resource suitable for teachers, students, and policy makers as well as for a broader audience. Each book deals with a single topic related to South Africa and is written by one or more specialists. In addition to the text, useful supplementary materials such as bibliographies and chronologies, copies of original documents, and maps are included. Together, the books provide a thorough assessment of a pivotal decade in the history of southern Africa.

The South Africa UPDATE Series is produced under the aegis of the Ford Foundation's Southern Africa Study Group and the guidance of an editorial board consisting of academics, former U.S. government and UN officials, journalists, and business, labor, and foundation executives. The opinions expressed in the books, however, are those of the authors.

John de St. Jorre
Editor
South Africa UPDATE Series

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# ALL, HERE, AND NOW: BLACK POLITICS IN SOUTH AFRICA IN THE 1980s

# Introduction: The Roots of Insurrection

The long struggle for black political rights in South Africa has been marked by several critical turning points, but none was as crucial, or as dramatic, as the events of the 1980s. The decade began with black schoolchildren refusing to accept the educational system, continued with the most sustained and determined black rebellion against white rule in South Africa's history, and ended with the unbanning of the exiled black political parties, the release of their leaders, and the beginning of negotiations with the South African government for a major political transformation. It was the decade when the pillars of apartheid finally gave way under social, economic, and political pressures from the black majority. It was the time when ethnic politics—"black politics," "white politics," "Coloured politics," "Indian politics"—became simply "South African politics."

The demographic and economic strength of blacks had been growing in the 1970s. But in the 1980s, a new determination and new tactics took hold. Student, consumer, and voter boycotts, mass demonstrations, national "stayaways" from work, and the growth of trade union power—both in the workplace and as an adjunct to community-based action—rendered apartheid unworkable and forced the government to seek new political solutions. Despite several states of emergency, tens of thousands of arrests, and thousands of deaths in political unrest, black political organizations emerged stronger than at any time in South Africa's modern history.

If one man's experience symbolizes the momentous changes

that occurred in the political fortunes of black South Africans during the 1980s, it is that of Nelson Mandela. In 1980 he was a virtually forgotten political prisoner on Robben Island. Ten years later he was free and in possession of a political and moral charisma that put him on equal footing with the world's leaders. The campaign for his release had begun in South Africa, but it rapidly became an international cause. Mandela's own resolute and principled stand throughout his twenty-seven years in prison strengthened his image as a freedom fighter and a leader. By the end of the decade he was the world's most famous political prisoner, and his release in early 1990 generated an international outpouring of hope. While not the undisputed leader of all black South Africans, he immediately became their most venerated spokesperson.

The odysseys of black political leaders from jail cells to negotiating tables during this period were paralleled by the journeys of millions of ordinary black South Africans from apathy to protest, from despair to hope. The scale of the political awakening helped make the 1980s the climax of a century of black protest in which blacks had tried petitions, civil disobedience, community control, labor stayaways, and guerrilla warfare in an effort to obtain their rights.

When the Union of South Africa was formed in 1910, its Constitution excluded all blacks from Parliament and denied most of them the right to vote. In 1912 a group of educated members of the small African middle class, including a number of chiefs, established the organization now known as the African National Congress (ANC).

Impatience over the lack of progress toward African rights erupted in periodic boycotts, strikes, and other forms of defiance of white authority. Africans drew inspiration from Mohandas K. Gandhi, who had lived in South Africa from 1893 until 1914 and who used there some of the civil disobedience methods that later helped him end British rule in India. But during the first period of black protest, from 1912 through the 1940s, Africans relied mainly on tactics that fell within the law. Convinced that whites would respond to persuasion, African leaders used petitions, deputations, and resolutions to lobby for their rights. When the government established the powerless advisory body known as the Natives' Representative Council (NRC) in 1936, ANC followers became members. If their tactics were moderate, so were their goals. Africans were willing to accept a qualified franchise for those who could pass a "civilisation test."

Even these moderate aims were rebuffed. The land acts of 1913 and 1936 sharply limited the places where Africans could live or own property. Africans were removed from the common voters' roll in Cape Province in 1936. In 1948 the National Party came to power on a platform of apartheid—greater racial separation.

Africans began to take a tougher stance. Angered by the violent breaking of the 1946 mineworkers' strike by Prime Minister Jan Smuts's government, they suspended meetings of the NRC. A younger generation of African nationalists was rising to prominence within the ANC. Stimulated by wartime idealism, the militancy of African trade unions, and leftwing activists in the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) and other groups, they founded the ANC Youth League in 1944. Although similar in background to the middle-class professionals who had created the ANC in 1912, these younger activists were impatient with moderate tactics and the failure of the ANC to develop into a mass movement. Under their urging, the ANC adopted a program of African nationalism and mass action in 1949.

This gave rise to the Defiance Campaign of 1952, a nationwide civil disobedience movement. It was organized by the younger, more militant leaders of the ANC—Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela, and Walter Sisulu—as well as by the older Chief Albert John Lutuli, the ANC president. More than eight thousand Africans and their allies went to jail for defying apartheid laws. The ANC's membership soared to about one hundred thousand. But the campaign lapsed before it had broken down the laws dividing the races. New repressive laws were passed, including the sweeping Suppression of Communism Act and others limiting meetings and demonstrations.

In 1955 the ANC and its white, Indian, and Coloured allies convened a "congress of the people" on a private athletic field in Kliptown, about fifteen miles from Johannesburg. The delegates adopted the Freedom Charter, a statement of principles and policy that has remained the movement's guiding philosophy.

In 1956 the government brought treason charges against 156 opposition leaders, most of them black and members of the ANC. Although the trial eventually ended in acquittal for the defendants, it crippled the activities of the ANC and its allies, the Indian congress movement and the South African Communist Party, which had been formally banned in 1950.

The dividing lines in black South African politics have been as much over strategy as principle. In the 1930s some black political thinkers favored a boycott of the NRC and other advisory boards. The boycott strategy, championed by the Cape Province–

based Non-European Unity Movement, gained growing acceptance among other political groups as more moderate tactics failed. In the 1950s a growing number of ANC members objected to the movement's policy of cooperating with whites who were opposed to apartheid. In April 1959 a group of these broke away to form the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) under the presidency of Robert Sobukwe. The PAC, whose "Africanist" philosophy precluded any form of collaboration with whites, advocated a "sustained, disciplined, nonviolent campaign."

The PAC called for a mass demonstration on March 21, 1960, to protest against the pass system that restricted blacks' freedom of movement. A large crowd of Africans gathered around the local police station in Sharpeville, an African township in the industrial complex of Vereeniging, thirty-five miles south of Johannesburg. The police opened fire, shooting even after people turned to flee. Sixty-nine Africans, including women and children, were shot dead, the great majority hit in the back. On March 30 a state of emergency was declared. Sobukwe was jailed and, from that time until his death in 1978, spent his days either in prison or banned. Thousands of others were jailed, which decimated the ANC and PAC leaderships.

Deciding that their only choices were to "submit or fight," members of the ANC and their Communist allies turned to armed struggle and formed *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (Spear of the Nation). *Umkhonto* initially focused its attacks on elements of the economic infrastructure, such as electric pylons, and symbols of the state. Its first operations took place on December 16, 1961, the anniversary of the Afrikaners' defeat of the Zulus at Blood River in 1838.

On July 11, 1963, security police captured *Umkhonto* leaders at their headquarters in Rivonia, a white suburb of Johannesburg. ANC leaders, including Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela, were sentenced to life imprisonment. By the mid-1960s, the government had not only uprooted most of the underground but had also demoralized and routed the entire radical opposition.

A fresh generation of politicized African, Indian, and Coloured students gave birth to a new doctrine and organization of resistance in the late 1960s and early 1970s. They spread a doctrine of "black consciousness," which, like the Africanism of the PAC, rejected any role for whites in the liberation struggle. In December 1968 African and Indian students formed the South African Students' Organization (SASO), with Steve Biko as its president. Biko, a charismatic personality with a penetrating analytical mind, dominated black politics for much of the following decade.

SASO described black consciousness as "an attitude of mind, a

way of life," and called for "group cohesion and solidarity" so that blacks could wield the economic and political power they already possessed. According to SASO, it was necessary to liberate blacks from their own attitudes of inferiority and subservience before political rights could be achieved. Black consciousness also established a following in black theological seminaries and in the black community through the Black People's Convention (BPC), which was launched in July 1972.

The government cracked down on the black consciousness movement in March 1973 with the banning of Biko and seven other leaders. Biko was prohibited from speaking publicly and was restricted to King Williams Town in the Eastern Cape. By late 1977 it looked as though the black consciousness movement had been crushed: Biko had been killed in detention in September 1977, and in the same month the government banned nineteen black consciousness organizations, including the newspaper the *World*.

In early 1973, at the time of the crackdown on black consciousness, a series of strikes broke out in Durban. It was not the first outbreak of worker militancy. In the late 1920s, white and black members of the Communist Party had led union organizing drives among African workers and met with considerable success. After a decline, African trade union activity revived in the late 1930s and in the 1940s, especially among workers in the growing industrial sector. During World War II, despite punitive regulations, African workers took part in a wave of illegal strikes. The 1973 Durban strikes, unlike the earlier union activity, produced few clear leaders. Inspired by leaders from the workers' ranks, spontaneous work stoppages led to higher wages and the liberalization of some of the laws restricting black trade unions.

Discontent with the system of education for Africans erupted in 1976, when students in Soweto organized a protest against the introduction of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in African secondary schools. The government said the use of Afrikaans was a practical matter, but to Africans, it was another way of keeping them down educationally and of making them feel inferior. When twenty thousand students marched through the streets of Soweto on June 16, 1976, they were confronted by a contingent of white police officers. A police officer opened fire, killing a thirteen-year-old boy named Hector Petersen. Fighting broke out and quickly spread to other townships. Over the next sixteen months, at least seven hundred people were killed, most shot by police. A handful of whites also died, including two who were beaten to death in Soweto on June 16.

After a decade of apathy, the Soweto student uprising roused many blacks. The protest revealed the ruthlessness of the government yet also showed its vulnerability. The defiance of the schoolchildren and the rapid spread of the revolt around the country shook the authorities and led to tentative steps toward reform.

But the militant spirit of 1976 lived on, spurring the protests of the 1980s. Thousands of students fled into exile, where many joined *Umkhonto*. Inside South Africa, blacks started forming local groups in the townships to protest high rents and bus fares, poor municipal services and education, and other local conditions. In 1979 the government, hoping to encourage better relations between employers and the work force and to control the spread of black trade unionism, granted legal recognition to the black unions. With the advantage of hindsight, it can be said that by 1980 the building blocks for an unprecedented surge of black political opposition were in place.

Before turning to the events of the 1980s, it may be helpful to take a short tour of South Africa's provinces, whose differences are both marked and politically important. While rebellion in the 1980s resulted in nationwide changes, the dynamics of black politics were largely local. Demographic, economic, political, and cultural factors combined to give a special character to each of the country's regions. In addition, pass laws restricting freedom of movement, the dangers of detention, and inconvenient transportation links made it difficult for black activists to travel from township to township. The political landscape was balkanized, and though organizations were loosely connected, most black leaders worked within their own regions and townships, each having a distinct history and character.

South Africa is administratively divided into four provinces—the Cape, the Orange Free State, Natal, and the Transvaal—that owe their origins to the pattern of colonial conquest and settlement in the nineteenth century. Cape Province, the largest, has two distinct though not formally separated parts. These are the Western Cape, which includes Cape Town and the Cape Peninsula, and the Eastern Cape, whose main centers are Port Elizabeth and East London.

## *Cape Province*

*Western Cape*. The Western Cape's political character has been defined by the large number of so-called Coloureds, people of racially mixed ancestry, who outnumber whites and Africans. They are predominantly Afrikaans-speaking and members of the Dutch Reformed church, whereas Africans are usually members of the Anglican, Catholic, or Zion Christian churches.

Culturally, legally, and geographically, Coloureds were closer to Afrikaners than to Africans before being pushed away by apartheid laws. The 1910 Constitution protected the rights that Coloureds had enjoyed under the British. The most important was the franchise in Cape Province, where they voted on a common roll with whites; in many districts they held swing votes. But in 1956 the ruling National Party packed the high court with its supporters and changed the Constitution. The Coloureds lost their right to vote with whites and were placed on a separate roll.

In 1983 the government introduced a new constitution with a tricameral Parliament that provided separate chambers for whites, Coloureds, and Indians. This attempt to woo Coloureds into an alliance came too late. Black politics in the Western Cape had been tilted leftward by Coloured intellectuals in the unity movement, who rejected any involvement in government structures, and by increasingly militant students. While neither the unity movement nor other leftwing Coloured groups ever gained mass support, they have had a strong impact on political thinking in the region.

Cape Town, the largest city in the Western Cape, is the seat of Parliament. It was the first settlement of the Dutch East India Company in 1652. Nestled between rocky cliffs and the sea on a peninsula, Cape Town's Mediterranean climate makes it a prime tourist attraction, and its old plaster buildings give the city a special charm. Many whites live beside the pristine beaches, while others reside in cool, shaded suburbs along the base of the flat-topped Table Mountain. The city's only central Coloured area, Bokaap, is on a hill of cobblestoned streets dotted with mosques.

The reality of apartheid is ever present. Off the coast but within sight of the city lies Robben Island, the prison where Nelson Mandela and hundreds of other political prisoners spent years of their lives. Above the docks, in the center of the city, is the former District Six, where Coloureds lived before the government razed the area in the name of slum clearance. Designated a white area, it was largely vacant for twenty-five years.

Toward the neck of the Cape Penninsula, the mountains melt