

# South Africa under Apartheid

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*“(I)t was a crime to walk through a Whites Only door, a crime to ride a Whites Only bus, a crime to use a Whites Only drinking fountain, a crime to walk on a Whites Only beach, a crime to be on the streets past eleven, a crime not to have a pass book and a crime to have the wrong signature in that book, a crime to be unemployed and a crime to be employed in the wrong place, a crime to live in certain places and a crime to have no place to live. Every week we interviewed old men from the countryside who told us that generation after generation of their family had worked on a scraggly piece of land from which they were now being evicted, ... people who had lived in the same house for decades only to find that it was now declared a white area and they had to leave without any recompense at all.”—Nelson Mandela<sup>1</sup>*

## OVERVIEW:

*Although racism and informal segregation are features of many societies around the world, they reached their zenith with the imposition of formal apartheid in South Africa from 1948 to 1994. The key elements of apartheid are not unique: spatial segregation by race/ethnicity; mechanisms to control the movements of members of the indigenous people now deemed non-citizens of the new nation-state; military occupation and violent suppression of protest; and denial of citizenship and voting rights to the disadvantaged group in order to prevent them from using electoral means to effect change. Nor were the excuses proffered for apartheid unique. In fact, they have been echoed by current day governments in other parts of the world. Examination of how apartheid was implemented sheds light on why the economic legacy of apartheid has been so enduring, even 20 years after apartheid formally ended in South Africa. It also alerts Canadians to the long-term human misery that inevitably results from allowing governments anywhere to implement ethnic-based segregation.*



## What apartheid consisted of

Apartheid is an institutionalised and legalised policy of racism, which was implemented in South Africa between 1948 and 1994. The word *apartheid* is Afrikaans, and means “apartness.” For almost 50 years, the country was openly ruled according to racist policies ensuring the maintenance of the socio-economic privileges of the white minority, to the detriment of, among others, the black majority.<sup>2</sup> The establishment of apartheid would not have been possible had black South Africans had the vote. However, the Afrikaners (the descendants of Dutch colonists who arrived in the mid-1600s) succeeded in convincing both the British government and British South Africans to not immediately extend the vote to Black South Africans following the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910. (The Union itself was the result of the unification of the two British colonies and the two Dutch colonies in the wake of Dutch defeat during the Second Boer War.) With WWI looming, Britain was eager to placate the defeated Afrikaners. Black South Africans did not gain the right to vote until 1994, and were thus prevented from having any influence on the composition and policies of successive governments.

The goal of apartheid was not only to enforce a system of racial segregation. It was also to ensure the reproduction, throughout the country, of a particular economic and labour relations model that had already been imposed in the mining industry where, by exploiting black migrant workers, immense profits were generated for foreign shareholders and a tiny fraction of the white minority. This model also generated cheap labour for white-owned farms and the white middle class in general.<sup>3</sup>

In general terms, apartheid was race-based social, economic, political and educational segregation experienced by South Africans.<sup>4</sup> Just when it was becoming more and more common elsewhere in the world

to adopt legislation aimed at ensuring equal rights for the different ethnicities within countries, the South African regime embarked on the reverse, doing its utmost to perpetuate the unacceptable.

## The impact of apartheid on South Africans' daily lives

Although formal apartheid was established in 1948, many informal or unevenly enforced discriminatory measures had already been imposed in some parts of the country for many years. Since the Dutch colonists arrived in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, segregation had been practiced in different periods and places in the Dutch and British colonies that preceded the establishment of the Union of South Africa and later the Republic of South Africa; apartheid represented the zenith of hundreds of years of discrimination. After the National Party was elected, many of these practices become enshrined in national law. Segregation further intensified and was extended and enforced throughout the country through national laws and the imposition of various penalties for infractions. White privileges were thereby consolidated and expanded.

### Racial classification of all individuals

In 1950, the South African government passed a law requiring that every South African be registered and classified by their "race".<sup>5</sup> Each individual was categorized as belonging to one of the following groups: White, Coloured and Black ; the category of "Indians", that is to say, South Asians from the former British India, was added later. The job one could hold and where one could live depended on one's classification. Absurd tests were conducted to determine which race an individual belonged to. For example, the colour of one's eyelids was considered an indicator of one's race.<sup>6</sup> Members of the same family were sometimes arbitrarily separated because the authorities determined that not all of the members of a family belonged to the same racial group.<sup>7</sup> Later, in order to deflect national and international criticism for its refusal to grant voting rights to black South Africans, the government would further classify blacks into different language-based "races" and consign each to a particular Bantustan (see below). Blacks would be declared citizens of the assigned Bantustan, which served as a pretext to strip them of South African citizenship.

### Race-based division of residential spaces

In 1950, the government passed the Group Areas Act under which space in cities and towns was divided into segregated racially homogenous spaces. The neighbourhoods reserved for Whites were subsequently emptied of all Blacks and the latter were obliged to move to the spaces allocated to them. However, these were situated at some distance from the places where many Blacks worked. Entire neighbourhoods were emptied simply because the government arbitrarily decided to declare them Whites-only spaces. These "removals" (forced displacements) caused great suffering.<sup>89</sup> Similar processes happened in formerly multi-ethnic neighbourhoods. The affected communities had no legal recourse to prevent the expulsions. In some cases, whole suburbs were destroyed to make way for Whites-only housing developments. For example, Sophiatown, a predominantly Black multi-ethnic community—and Black South Africans' cultural and political hub—was razed and its inhabitants forcibly displaced after the government decided to declare it a White area. An exclusively White neighbourhood—named *Triomf*—was erected on Sophiatown's rubble.<sup>10</sup>



The "removals" in Sophiatown, 1955 Source: Museum Africa

The "removals" in Sophiatown, 1955 Source: Museum Africa

### The imposition of passbooks and the control of Black people's movements in spaces reserved for Whites

During the initial apartheid years, Black men had to carry an ID card if they wanted to go into urban areas. Moreover, unless they had a permit to work in a "White" area, they were not allowed to remain more than 72 hours in the city, and could not permanently establish themselves there unless very precise conditions were met.<sup>11</sup> Then, in 1952, a law was passed stipulating that all previous permits and passes were to be combined in a single "reference book", the *Dompas*, and that Black men had to carry the *Dompas* at all times.

In 1956, this requirement was extended to women, until then exempt from the pass requirements. Although in theory all South Africans had to carry a passbook, in practice whites did not.<sup>12</sup>

### **Racially differentiated education**

In 1953, the *Bantu Education Act* was passed. It stipulated that Blacks were to be provided an education that would prepare them for the jobs for which they were destined. The law had three objectives: to discourage the creation of criminal gangs; to provide a minimal education to Blacks to prepare them for the work expected of them; and, above all, to make them incapable of competing with Whites for other kinds of jobs. They were to be trained for low-skilled work,<sup>13</sup> and serve as a ready supply of cheap labour:

*“The Natives will be taught from childhood to realize that equality with Europeans is not for them. There is no place for the Bantu child above the level of certain forms of labour.” Dr H.F. Verwoerd, Minister of Native Affairs, 1953. (Verwoerd later became Prime Minister. He is widely considered the architect of apartheid.)*

The disparities in education, far from being accidental, were the result of thought-out policies, as international bodies such as UNESCO sharply denounced.<sup>14</sup> In addition to insisting on an inferior curriculum for Black children, the government underfunded Black children’s education: *per capita* funding levels were a fraction of those provided for the education of white children.

These education policies contributed to the gap between Blacks and Whites in many spheres, such as work, salaries and the general distribution of economic resources. Even when Blacks and Whites performed the same work, Blacks were paid much less, despite the significant economic boom in South Africa in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>15</sup> In certain sectors and certain times, Whites received wages twenty times higher than Blacks’ wages, even when performing the same tasks.<sup>16</sup> Generally, the standards of living of Whites and Blacks were quite disparate. Moreover, the rural areas in which Blacks lived were impoverished by the apartheid regime by being deprived of their male workforce through the various government measures aimed at obliging black men to work in the mines owned by Whites.

### **Race-based distinctions in access to public amenities**

The different racial groups had to use different entrances and exits at government buildings. They also could not use the same public washrooms nor access the same recreational facilities. A Black person could only go into designated restaurants, and could not use the beach of his or her choice or even sit where he or she wanted on a public bus or train.<sup>17</sup>

### **Prohibition of Mixed-race Marriages**

In 1949, marriage between individuals of different races was prohibited. The following year, having sexual relations with someone of another race became illegal. To enforce this law, the police raided homes and broke into bedrooms to try to catch couples *in flagrante delicto*.<sup>18</sup> Those caught could find themselves accused of “criminal sexual aggressions.”<sup>19</sup>

### **The omnipresence of violence under apartheid**

Such an inegalitarian situation could not have been maintained for such a long time without other massive human rights violations. The regime’s opponents were the target of significant persecution, such as arbitrary detentions, torture, forced exile, disproportionately lengthy prison sentences, etc. Many leading figures in the anti-apartheid struggle were arbitrarily eliminated by the government, such as Steve Biko, beaten to death while detained by the authorities in 1977, and Ruth First, assassinated in 1982 by parcel bomb while in exile. For non-whites, the right to a fair trial was far from guaranteed.

Those who protested against the apartheid regime were often subjected to extreme violence.





Near the end of the 1980s, when international pressure forced the regime to free Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and various other leading figures of the ANC who had been imprisoned since 1964, the government cast about for new ways to undermine the ANC. It turned to *Inkatha*, a conservative nationalist Zulu party that it would arm and allow to attack ANC activists and presumed sympathizers. Inkatha killed approximately 14,000 ANC supporters or presumed supporters in the run up to the first non-racial elections, held in 1994.

It must be noted that apartheid was not only oppressive, it had grave consequences for Black South Africans' health. For example, in the 1960s, one in four Black South African children died before the age of one.<sup>20</sup>

## The impact of apartheid on community life

Throughout the 20th century, Blacks' rights were controlled by the white minority. After 1913, when they were nearly 70 percent of the population, Blacks were not allowed to buy or rent property outside the 7.3 percent of the territory allocated to them under the Native Land Act. Later, gradually, the same kind of spatial separation took shape in the larger cities. The regime thereby attempted to control the movements, the kind of work, the place of residence, etc., of the non-white segments of the population. In 1959, this injustice culminated in the establishment of the bantustans.

### Creation of the bantustans

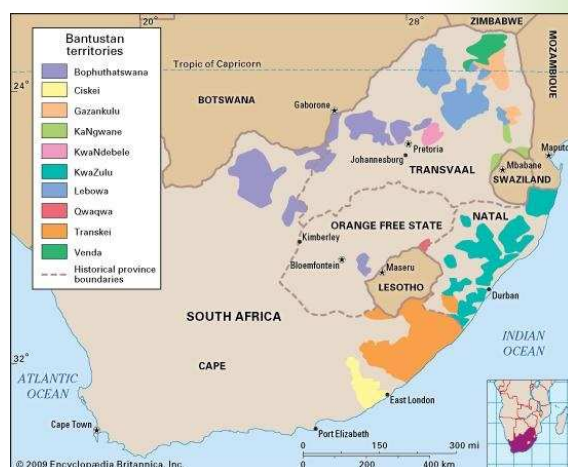
In 1959, the government increased the areas for Black reserves from 7.3 to 13 percent of South African territory and took steps to make the areas reserved for Blacks distinct states. The latter, called bantustans, were established by the government in order to deflect criticism for denying the Black majority the right to the vote. According to the South African government, Blacks would exercise their economic and political rights in the Bantustans and, although not citizens of South Africa, would become full-fledged citizens of one of the ten bantustans.

The results were catastrophic. Underdeveloped territories—with infertile soil and without industries—the bantustans would never allow Blacks to flourish, and instead would keep them in a state of poverty. The governments of the bantustans would never become genuinely independent of the South African government and the powers delegated to them remained marginal.<sup>21</sup> In reality, the bantustans – the only Black governance institutions tolerated by the South African government, were established primarily to deflect international criticisms of the regime. The last Blacks living in the “white” areas were obliged to sell their land at very low prices to Whites before leaving for one of the bantustans. It must be noted that the population suffered grave poverty and health problems in the bantustans; the Bantustan population centres were no more than shantytowns,<sup>22</sup> and thousands of people met their deaths there.<sup>23</sup> In all, 3.5 million people were obliged to move there, at that time the largest peacetime forced displacement in history. The government would continue to actively implement this policy until late in the 1980s.

Although millions of Blacks were forced to move to the bantustans, large numbers of them continued to work in the cities or near them due to the lack of job opportunities in the bantustans. The distance between where they were obliged to reside and their places of work forced many bantustan residents to leave home as early as 2:30 am in order to reach work by 7 am. They returned home at 9 to 10:30 pm.<sup>24</sup>

## How the South African government justified apartheid

The founders of the National Party—the party that conceived and established apartheid—were convinced that the Afrikaners were threatened by the British government and by South Africans of British origin. They also considered Indians and Jews an economic threat and feared that Black South Africans would “steal”



lower-skilled jobs from Afrikaners. They also feared loss of their privileged position as Whites, and assimilation. Having come to blows with British imperialism, the Afrikaners developed a nationalist sentiment that became ever more chauvinist. As well, social Darwinism, which was much in vogue in the first half of the 20th century, was invoked to justify racial hierarchies. The regime proffered various justifications nationally and internationally for apartheid:

### **The theory of the “uninhabited” territory**

In order to justify their seizure and control of the land on which the indigenous Black majority lived, the Afrikaners claimed that the Blacks had arrived from further north in Africa at around the same time as Dutch settlers had established themselves in what would become South Africa. According to this concept, South African territory had been uninhabited and therefore available for the settlers to establish themselves on. In reality, many African tribes lived in the region prior to the arrival of the Dutch.

### **Theological justifications**

The Afrikaners, coming from the Calvinist tradition, interpreted Biblical passages in a manner that appeared to justify apartheid. Thus, in the minds of Afrikaners, the descendants of Dutch settlers in South Africa were a chosen people. According to this interpretation, it was Whites’ “Christian duty” to act as the guardians of non-Whites until the latter were up to the task of managing their own affairs,<sup>25</sup> in other words, until they were “civilized.” Until then, Blacks were to be submissive toward the White minority.

### **The “separate development” argument**

Following the example of the southern US’s segregationist policies of the 1960s and 70s, one of the justifications most often invoked to defend the regime’s policies of differentiated rights was the right of each race to evolve independently of the others. According to this argument, equality of opportunity was most likely to become a reality if the different races did not compete with each other.<sup>26</sup> In reality, Blacks never had the same opportunities as blacks and apartheid was a way maintaining Whites’ privileges and domination.

### **The “We’re fighting terrorism/communism” argument**

In the 1980s and 90s when international pressure on the South African government over its apartheid policies intensified, the government conducted a campaign to demonize the African National Congress (ANC),<sup>27</sup> portraying it as a terrorist group. Although the ANC’s military wing, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK), tried to avoid killing civilians when it attacked state or military institutions, white civilians were occasionally injured or killed as a result of MK actions. Nonetheless, the international community was, in general, well aware that the government was far more violent and was committing more brutal acts against the civilian population than the MK. Despite this, the existence of the MK was an excuse for some states, such as the US, Great Britain and Canada, to oppose imposition of sanctions for several years. These countries’ significant mining investments in South Africa may explain their reluctance to take effective action against the apartheid regime.

### **The “South Africa is being unfairly singled out for criticism” argument**

In 1987, South African ambassador Glenn Babb visited the Peguis Reserve, at the invitation of its chief, with journalists in tow. Although the publicity about the conditions observed on the Peguis reserve during the visit was useful for the reserve’s residents, the South African regime and its Canadian supporters took advantage of the publicity to deflect criticisms of apartheid South Africa. Nevertheless, one government’s violations of human rights and international law cannot be excused or justified because of the injustices committed by another.

<sup>1</sup> Mandela, Nelson. *Long Walk to Freedom*. Little, Brown and Company. 1994, p 149.

<sup>2</sup> Okolo Chukwudum Barnabas. 1984. « Apartheid As Unfreedom » *Présence Africaine*, vol. 1, N° 129, pp. 20-37.

<sup>3</sup> For further information, see the CJPME Foundation factsheet *Roots of Apartheid: South Africa’s mining industry*

<sup>4</sup> Okolo Chukwudum Barnabas. 1984. *Ibid*.

<sup>5</sup> The Population Registration Act, No 30 of 1950.

<sup>6</sup> Apartheid Museum, Resources (online), *Chapter 3 : The implementation of Apartheid*, Oxford University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Apartheid Museum, Resources (en ligne), *Chapter 3 ibid*.

<sup>8</sup> Apartheid Museum (en ligne), *Chapter 3. Ibid*.

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- <sup>9</sup> Okolo Chukwudum Barnabas. 1984. Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Apartheid Museum, Resources (en ligne), *Chapter 3 ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> <http://www.sahistory.org.za/south-africa-1806-1899/pass-laws-south-africa-1800-1994>
- <sup>12</sup> Apartheid Museum, Resources (en ligne), *Chapter 3*
- <sup>13</sup> Apartheid Museum Resources (en ligne), *Chapter 3.*
- <sup>14</sup> Okolo Chukwudum Barnabas. 1984. Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Okolo Chukwudum Barnabas. 1984. Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> <http://africanactivist.msu.edu/image.php?objectid=32-131-350>
- <sup>17</sup> Okolo Chukwudum Barnabas. 1984. Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Apartheid Museum, Resources (en ligne), *Chapter 3*
- <sup>19</sup> Okolo Chukwudum Barnabas. 1984. Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Apartheid Museum, Resources (en ligne), *Chapter 3.*
- <sup>21</sup> Okolo Chukwudum Barnabas. 1984. Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> Apartheid Museum, Resources (en ligne), *Chapter 3*
- <sup>23</sup> Okolo Chukwudum Barnabas. 1984. Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> "The KwaNdebele Night-riders", *South Africa : the cordoned heart*, Omar Badsha. Cape Town : Gallery Press ; New York : W.W. Norton & Co., 1986.
- <sup>25</sup> Okolo Chukwudum Barnabas. 1984. Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Apartheid Museum, Resources (en ligne), *Chapter 3.*
- <sup>27</sup> The ANC had in fact been banned in 1960 shortly after the Sharpeville massacre. However, it continued to operate underground for decades. In 1983, a legal organization, the United Democratic Front (UDF), was formed. UDF adopted the ANC's Freedom Charter, a statement of the aims for a free South Africa and basis for a democratic constitution. The strong relationship between the ANC and the UDF was based on this shared mission statement. Throughout its existence, the UDF demanded the release of imprisoned ANC leaders, as well as other political prisoners. However, the UDF was never formally attached to the ANC, and did not participate in the armed struggle.