

African liberation

African liberation, in the context of this essay, refers to the processes leading to the achievement of political rights by peoples on the African continent and of African descent in the second half of the 20th century.

An even broader definition could extend the time period backward to centuries of resistance to colonial conquest and slavery or forward to the prospect of addressing the legacies of social and economic inequality. But the period following World War 2, encompassing the political independence of almost all African states, the achievements of the US civil rights movement in eliminating legalized racial discrimination, and the end of South African apartheid, constitutes a subject of particular interest not only for African and African diaspora history but also for tracing the emergence of transnational networks.

In some senses the 20th-century history of every African country is intrinsically transnational history. The decolonization process involved interaction between colonizer and colonized, as well as mutual influences among those colonized by the same power. It was also shaped by the evolution of global norms and institutions, interactions between different colonial powers, and Cold War competition. Even in the cases of Liberia and Ethiopia, recognized as independent states before the decolonization era, the *de facto* involvement of outside powers was fundamental.

The subset of African countries that resorted to armed struggle to achieve political rights had particularly strong transnational effects. This included Algeria (1954–62), Eritrea (1961–93), and Western Sahara (1973–). Each of these had significant transnational linkages: witness, for example, the impact of the thinking of Caribbean émigré Frantz Fanon and of the film *Battle of Algiers*. Most prominent, however, were the territories under white-minority or Portuguese colonial rule that defied the trend towards peaceful decolonization in the 1960s. Concentrated in Southern Africa, they included South Africa; South West Africa (Namibia) under South African occupation; Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), ruled by a white-settler regime which declared independence from British rule in 1965; and the Portuguese colonies of Angola, Mozambique, and, in West Africa, Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde.

Armed struggle began in Angola and South Africa in 1961, in Guinea-Bissau in 1963,

in Mozambique in 1964, and in Namibia and Zimbabwe in 1966. From the 1960s into the early 1990s, these struggles and linked internal resistance to minority rule, particularly in South Africa, were prominent on the agendas of international organizations. They drew in not only the two major Cold War competitors but also many other states. And they evoked an interconnected global network of African solidarity and anti-apartheid organizations that touched every world region.

This network, with a scope shown by the diversity of examples cited in this essay, constituted one of the most significant transnational social movements of the 20th century. It crossed geographic boundaries within and beyond the African continent. It also featured both state and non-state actors and informal personal connections as well as formal ties.

African linkages

Within Africa, transnational linkages included those already established by colonial patterns, particularly in the Southern African region shaped by the mining and migrant-labour complex centred on South Africa, which was of particular interest to international capital. The new networks formed to support independence included continentwide networks as well as those specific to the Southern African region. In 1958, Ghana hosted the first conference of independent African states and the first All African People's Conference, which included representatives from South Africa and South West Africa. The Conferência das Organizações Nacionalistas das Colónias Portuguesas (CONCP), founded in 1961 in Casablanca, Morocco, grouped the movements fighting against Portuguese colonialism. The Casablanca Group of independent states, also formed in 1961, consisted of Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Ghana, Guinea, and Mali. Preceding the founding of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in 1963, it stressed support for liberation movements in Southern Africa. The OAU also committed itself to the freedom of the rest of the continent, and established a liberation committee based in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

Dar es Salaam was the most prominent meeting place on the continent for African and international support of the Southern African liberation struggles, although its centrality somewhat diminished after the independence of Mozambique and Angola in

1975 and Zimbabwe in 1980. In 1958, Julius Nyerere hosted fellow nationalists from Kenya, Uganda, Nyasaland, and Northern and Southern Rhodesia in Mwanza, Tanganyika, all six countries then under British rule. The Pan African Freedom Movement for East and Central Africa (PAFMECA) formed then was the predecessor of several later regional groupings. Probably the most critical for the liberation struggles was the Front Line States alliance. This was formed in 1975 with presidents Nyerere of Tanzania and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia as the nucleus, along with Sir Seretse Khama of Botswana and Samora Machel of the Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO). Later Angola, Zimbabwe, and Namibia also joined the alliance, which featured frequent informal summits as well as a working joint ministerial committee known as the Inter-State Defence and Security Committee.

State links and alliances

Among non-African countries, India not only set an example by its own independence; it was also first in supporting Southern African liberation. It took the lead at the United Nations, raising the issues of the rights of people of Indian descent in South Africa and of South Africa's occupation of Namibia. It was prominent in action on Southern Africa in the Non-Aligned Movement and in the Commonwealth. These commitments were reinforced by personal connections with South African Indians involved in the African National Congress (ANC), and by the memory of Gandhi's links to South Africa. Within the UN secretariat, Indian-born E. S. Reddy played a key behind-the-scenes role as the official in charge of action against apartheid from 1963 to 1984, relating to anti-apartheid groups around the world as well as to governments and liberation movements. In the Commonwealth secretariat, Guyana-born Shridath Ramphal, of Indian descent, kept Southern Africa high on the agenda in his term as secretary-general from 1975 to 1990.

Communist-ruled states, most prominently the Soviet Union, China, the German Democratic Republic, and Cuba, were also central actors in supporting Southern African liberation movements. They provided not only diplomatic support and financial, educational, and medical assistance, but also military training and equipment. Southern

Africans travelled to these countries, many learning the languages as well as other skills. African countries such as Tanzania, Congo (Brazzaville), and Angola hosted military trainers as well as civilian personnel from these countries. In most cases, it was party and party-sponsored solidarity associations that were primarily responsible for links to Africa. Among top leaders of these countries, only Fidel Castro gave high personal priority to African issues. But the Soviet involvement in particular was an essential source of support, particularly for the MPLA in Angola, SWAPO in Namibia, and the ANC in South Africa.

In some cases these links benefited from parallel party connections, including the Portuguese Communist Party and particularly the Communist Party of South Africa. But non-Communist liberation movement leaders also regarded the Communist-ruled states as 'natural allies' and were in turn regarded as the legitimate representatives of their movements. Speeches frequently invoked the example of the World War 2 alliance against Nazism.

Also very important in state-level support for the liberation movements, particularly from the early 1970s, were the Nordic countries – Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark. In every aspect but direct military support, these countries were seen by the movements as their most consistent allies. Assistance was provided both directly and through support for international agencies, for the Front Line States, and for anti-apartheid organizations elsewhere in Western Europe. This policy, supported across political party lines, reflected the roles these countries saw for themselves as global citizens, historical links with Southern Africa through missionary connections, and the influence of a cohort of officials and civil society activists who built close ties with liberation movements. Particularly prominent was Swedish Social Democrat Olof Palme, prime minister from 1969 until his assassination in 1986. Southern African liberation became a widely popular cause in the Nordic countries. Leaders such as Eduardo Mondlane of Mozambique, Amílcar Cabral of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, and Oliver Tambo of South Africa were highly respected.

Civil society links

The range of civil society solidarity ties was even greater than that of state involvement,

featuring not only specific characteristics in each country but also multiple transnational networks.

The impact of a long history of pan-African ties was particularly significant in the United States and in the Caribbean, not only in visible rhetorical connections but also in less visible ways. The daily demonstrations at the South African embassy in Washington in 1984–85 mobilized by the Free South Africa Movement coalition, for example, built on the work of the local Southern Africa Support Project. That work was spearheaded by a group of African American women who had helped organize US participation in the Sixth Pan-African Congress in Dar es Salaam in 1974. And their involvement in turn can be traced to the collaboration of the Tanzanian embassy in Washington with groups founded by veterans of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in 1968 and much influenced by veteran Caribbean revolutionary thinker C. L. R. James.

Other intersecting strands included the international ties symbolized by Paul Robeson and the Council on African Affairs from the late 1930s to the 1950s. Although eclipsed by the McCarthyite campaign against Communist-linked groups, Robeson remained a highly respected figure in activist circles. The non-Communist left and particularly the peace movement was also closely linked to African solidarity. African American pacifist Bill Sutherland, for example, helped spark the formation of the American Committee on Africa by putting US civil rights and peace activists in touch with the ANC's Defiance Campaign in 1952, before moving to Ghana and then to Tanzania. British Anglican cleric Michael Scott, who pled the cause of South West Africans at the United Nations, also linked the peace and African liberation movements.

International church links were also central to building international support for Southern African liberation. This was most dramatically illustrated by the decision in 1969 by the World Council of Churches to provide grants to liberation movements. Although the decision aroused intense controversy in some member churches, it built on a long history of debate about race, as well as the Council's World War 2 support for resistance to Hitler. Western churches were deeply influenced by African leaders such as Eduardo Mondlane of FRELIMO and Z. K. Matthews and Oliver Tambo of the ANC, as well as by the civil rights struggle in the United States.

During the period of widest anti-apartheid mobilization, from the emergence of the United Democratic Front in South Africa in 1983 and Bishop Desmond Tutu's Nobel Prize in 1984 to the London concert for Nelson Mandela in 1988 that was reportedly watched by as many as a billion people, the anti-apartheid movement took on mass proportions, fuelled by global media coverage. Efforts to isolate apartheid economically became serious threats to South Africa's economy. Although not directed by any central organization, this climax was fostered by multiple interconnecting organizational and personal networks crossing national boundaries. South African exiles participated not only as members of South African liberation movements but also through prominent direct roles in anti-apartheid organizations in their countries of exile. The release of Nelson Mandela from prison in February 1990 and South Africa's first non-racial election in April 1994 were global iconic events.

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