The Republic of South Africa

- What was the purpose of apartheid?
- How did apartheid affect the lives of South Africans?
- Who did South Africa move toward democracy?

“Free at last,” proclaimed Nelson Mandela in 1994 as South Africa held its first ever all-race elections. In a landslide victory, Mandela became the first black president of South Africa. The elderly leader had spent 27 years in prison for opposing the racial policies of the old white-dominated South African government.

“Let there be justice for all. Let there be peace for all,” declared Mandela as he took office. “The time for the healing of wounds has come.” South Africans of all races hoped that healing would take place.

A Policy of Forced Segregation

In 1910, Britain granted South Africa self-rule. Until 1994, a small white minority governed the nation. Whites then as now make up about 16 percent of South Africa’s population. The majority of South Africans – 70 percent – are black. Other racial groups include people of mixed racial background (11 percent) and Asians (3 percent).

Origins of Apartheid: In 1948, the Nationalist party gained power in South Africa. It drew support from conservative white farmers. Many of them were descended from Dutch settlers who held strong views of white superiority. South Africa was already segregated along racial lines, and the Nationalists strengthened the divisions. They set up the strict legal system of apartheid (uh PART ayd), or rigid separation of races.

Under apartheid, the government classified all South Africans as white, Bantu (black), “coloured” (people of mixed race), or Asian (which usually referred to people from India/Pakistan). It then passed laws to keep these racial groups separate. Nonwhites could not vote. They were also restricted as to where they could live and work.

The government assigned black ethnic groups, such as the Zulus and Xhosas, to live in a number of Bantustans, or “homelands”. The law made the Bantustans semi-independent republics, though each was politically and economically reliant on the South African government. Each black South African was made a citizen of a homeland, regardless of where s/he resided previously. Supporters of apartheid claimed that separation allowed each group to develop its own culture. The Bantustans, however, were located in remote, dry, infertile areas of South Africa. Four fifths of South Africa, including those regions that included rich mineral resources (like diamonds and gold) and fertile farmlands, remained in the hands of whites.

Strict laws: Because the South African economy was dependent on nonwhite workers, the government allowed some blacks to live outside the Bantustans, but enacted pass laws to control their movement. The pass laws required all nonwhite South Africans to carry a passbook in order to live or travel about in restricted areas. The passbook included a record of where they were permitted to travel or work, their tax payments, and a record of any criminal convictions. It had to be carried at all times and produced upon demand.

Pass laws and the homelands divided families. A person might have a job in town while his or her spouse and children had to remain in the Bantustan because they had no permission to reside in the town. One example, from a South African newspaper report, describes Mathilda Chikuye who was fined $25 for letting her husband live with her. She had a pass that permitted her to live in town but he did not. Since mixed neighborhoods were illegal under apartheid, nonwhite workers usually lived in townships, communities located some distance from the “white city”.

Apartheid enforced a system of racial inequality. Nonwhites were forbidden to ride on “white” busses, swim at “white” beaches, or eat a “white” restaurants. Apartheid also extended to education and employment. Black schools received much less money and other support than white schools. As a result, literacy remained low among black students, and many dropped out of school before graduation. Only a very few black African students received higher education to train for professional fields, and these limits were reinforced by restrictions that restricted each race to certain types of jobs.
Struggle Against Apartheid

There was opposition to apartheid from the start. Leaders such as Albert J. Luthuli (luh TOO lee) urged nonviolent resistance to unjust policies and actions. In 1960, while apartheid was still the law of the land, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In his acceptance speech he stated:

“[Apartheid] is a museum piece in our time, a hangover from the dark ages … a relic of an age that everywhere else is dead or dying … These ideas survive in South Africa because those to sponsor them profit from them.”

The South African police and government used violence, however. In 1960, protestors staged a peaceful demonstration against the pass laws in Sharpeville, a township near Johannesburg. The police opened fire on the unarmed protestors without issuing warning, killing more than 60 people and leaving at least 180 seriously wounded. The Sharpeville Massacre aroused anger worldwide. As protests continued, the government banned opposition groups such as the African National Congress (ANC). As a result, leaders of the movement against apartheid, such as Luthuli and Nelson Mandela, became targets of the police and went into hiding. Mandela was captured, charged with sabotage and attempting to violently overthrow the state, and sentenced to life in prison. He served 28 years, most of it in the notoriously harsh prison on Robben Island, where he was confined to a cell, forced to do hard labor, and allowed only one 30 minute visit per year. During his trial, he gave a famous speech in which he proclaimed:

“I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. …I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.”

Women and Youth: The contributions of South African women to the struggle against apartheid were essential. At one rally, more than 20,000 women marched through the white controlled city of Pretoria to demonstrate against pass laws. During the years of resistance, many women lost their lives or were sent to prison for their work.

For years, black South Africans had been subjected to an education system that was devised to limit their learning so that they could be trained as laborers, not professionals. This schooling especially restricted ideas that might encourage free thought and questioning the apartheid system. Fed up with this repression, students in the township of Soweto (suh WAY toh) located outside Johannesburg, protested a new law that insisted that Afrikaans would be used in equal measure alongside English for all teaching in public schools. Afrikaans is the language of white South Africans who are descended from Dutch settlers. Students and some teachers rejected the notion that they were to be educated in the language of their oppressor. The 1976 protest began peacefully, but turned violent when police opened fire on the unarmed youth. Protests spread across South Africa by appalled citizens.

Pressure Grows: While South Africans demanded change from within, international pressure also grew. The Organization of African Unity (OAU), a congress of delegates from independent African countries, had worked since its founding in 1963 to end apartheid. It urged member nations to boycott South Africa. The United Nations placed an arms embargo on South Africa. International sports organizations such as the Olympic Committee barred South African athletes from competition.

During the 1980s, many nations, including the US, imposed economic sanctions on South Africa. This meant that they cut off trade in most goods and ended financial dealings with South African businesses in an effort to pressure the country to abandon the apartheid system.

Steps Toward Change

Protests and economic sanctions had an effect. As sanctions slowed South Africa’s economy, white business leaders pressed for change. A growing number of white South Africans came to believe that apartheid must end in order for the country to grow.

An end to apartheid: By the mid-1980s, historic changes were underway. The government repealed the hated pass laws. It also opened some segregated facilities to all South Africans, regardless of race.

In 1989, South African president F.W. deKlerk lifted the ban on the African National Congress and other anti-apartheid groups. A year later, the government freed Nelson Mandela and other ANC leaders from prison and began to hold talks with black leaders.

In the early 1990s, a new constitution was written to guarantee blacks fundamental rights. In 1994, voters of all races elected a new government in an historic election that
included black votes for the first time in South Africa’s history. Mandela was swept into office as South Africa’s new president. “We are starting a new era of hope and reconciliation, of nation-building,” he said.

Majority rule: Mandela hoped to “heal the wounds of the past.” He backed the work of a government commission that was established to gather data about crimes committed under apartheid. Uncovering the truth was meant to help begin to free South Africa from its oppressive past.

Mandela called for a new order “based on justice for all.” He wanted to bring services such as electricity, housing, and decent schools to millions of black South Africans. That goal posed a significant challenge, especially because years of inequality under apartheid left black South Africans eager for rapid change.

Mandela faced many problems. The gap between rich and poor in South Africa was one of the largest in the world. In addition, ethnic and political tensions flared into violence at times between Mandela’s ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party led by Chief Buthelezi (boo tuh LEY zee). Then, in the late 1990s, economic troubles hit the nation hard.

South Africa’s Future: Mandela retired in 1999 at the age of 80. He continued to speak on behalf of justice and was active in the fight against poverty and HIV/AIDS. Madiba, as he is affectionately known, died in 2013 at 95 years old.

Mandela’s successor, Thabo (TAH bo) Mbeki, faced the challenge of making South Africa’s multiracial democracy work. Economic hardships, charges of corruption, and the AIDS epidemic further increased the difficulty. Despite these issues, South Africa has the advantage of abundant natural resources and a government which has pledged to reduce poverty and improve the lives of people who suffered under apartheid.

Identify:
1. Nelson Mandela
2. Albert J. Luthuli
3. Sharpeville Massacre
4. Soweto Uprising
5. F. W. deKlerk

Define
6. apartheid
7. Bantustan
8. Township

Respond
9. How did apartheid divide South African society? How did it promote social inequality?
10. Why did the South African government ultimately change its racist policies?