

# An Overview of Apartheid



Many ethnic groups live in South Africa: whites (of British and Dutch descent), blacks (of various African ethnic groups), Asians (mostly of Indian descent), and mixed-race groups. Apartheid was a policy of the all-white South African government to separate, exploit, and dominate the various nonwhite ethnic groups. Apartheid (pronounced *apart-hate*) means “apartness” in Afrikaans, the language of South Africa’s Dutch descendants. It became official policy after the 1948 national election, which was won by the racist, pro-apartheid Nationalist Party. Though apartheid started in the twentieth century, in many ways the policy institutionalized laws,

attitudes, and crimes practiced by whites against blacks for hundreds of years.

Through the policy of apartheid, the South African Government sought to thoroughly separate the privileged white minority from the black majority, creating two different racial worlds. The white society was characterized by wealth and luxury. White South Africans had the highest standard of living in Africa, and they attempted to recreate European society in their cities and towns. Most blacks lived in poverty, struggling each day to feed their families. Apartheid denied black communities the facilities and opportunities—such as education, housing, and high-paying jobs—that were common in white areas.

Despite the enormous ethnic diversity in South Africa, the government divided people into four broad racial categories which they called “European,” “African,” “Asian,” and “Colored” (people of mixed racial ancestry). Each racial group had different rights and roles under apartheid. Whites dominated South Africa by controlling most aspects of society, including the government, industry, agriculture, education, the military, and the press. Though whites were only 17% of the population in 1986, they owned 87% of the land.

Under apartheid, Asians and mixed-race groups who made up 13% of the population, were generally treated better than blacks but worse than whites. Unlike most blacks, many Asians and mixed-race persons held skilled jobs and completed secondary education. Still, apartheid made marriage or intimate relationships between races illegal until the 1980s, and so mixed-race families struggled to stay together. In the 1980s, the South African government gave Coloreds and Asians the right to vote for representatives in their own assembly, but they could not live in white areas or use whites facilities.

Above all, whites set up the system of apartheid to ensure that the black majority would not gain any economic or political power. Blacks, who were 70% percent of South Africa’s population in 1990, could not vote, received little education, and usually held menial jobs in mining, agriculture, industry, or domestic service. They could not move about the country freely without “pass books”—identification documents issued by the government declaring where each specific nonwhite could live.

The South African government further controlled blacks by segregating them into certain areas. In 1958 the South African government decided to enforce segregation by assigning all blacks to reserves. These reserves, also called homelands, totaled 13% of South Africa's land, even though blacks made up 68% of the population in 1958. Poor land in the reserves limited farming, and the government built few facilities such as factories, modern roads, schools, and hospitals.

Most men had to leave their homelands to seek work in mines or factories in white areas. They were forced to live apart from their families in workers' dorms for as many as 11 months of each year. Women who worked outside the reserves mostly worked as domestic servants in houses owned by white people. Though officially assigned to live in reserves, blacks who had menial jobs in white areas sometimes illegally squatted in shanty towns on the outskirts of white cities.

These overcrowded townships became centers for resistance movements like the African National Congress, the Pan African Congress, and the Black Consciousness movement. These groups recruited blacks who were frustrated by the dehumanizing racism of apartheid. Despite the apartheid government's often violent reaction to protests, black South Africans resisted apartheid in mass numbers and in many ways forms, such as civil disobedience, strikes, boycotts, and nonviolent demonstrations.