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Apartheid system in South Africa

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Why is in news? On March 17, 1992, 31 years ago, a referendum on ending apartheid was held in South Africa was introduced. While this referendum was restricted to only white voters, there was overwhelming support to end South Africa's highly discriminatory policies towards its non-white population.

The state of being apart

The Afrikaans word for "separateness" or "the state of being apart", the apartheid officially began in 1948.

While in principle, it did not significantly differ from long-standing policies of segregation, it instituted this segregation as law and a "fundamental truth" of South Africa, at a time when progress was being made around the world to address racism.

Classifying citizens into one of four racial groups – black, Indian, coloured (mixed race) and white – apartheid made it illegal for South Africans to pursue interracial relations.

It also introduced rigorous segregation according to race, establishing residential and business sections in urban areas for each race. This led to millions of Black South Africans being forcefully displaced from their homes and confined to tribal homelands (Bantustans) according to ethnicity. Effectively, over 80 per cent of South African land was owned by the white minority, which comprised around 20 per cent of the total population.

Furthermore, black South Africans were denied political and economic rights, essentially being reduced to cheap labour for the Whites.

These policies were justified within the white population not just with prevailing ideologies of white supremacy, but also by playing into the fears of the white minority.

A long history of resistance

Resistance to racism in South Africa pre-dates apartheid. As far back as the 1880s, the Imbumba ya Manyama (Union of Blacks) was formed, articulating an African identity that transcended tribalism.

However, perhaps the most famous political organisation resisting white domination was the African National Congress.

Formed in 1912, it started as a movement led by the elite Blacks to oppose their disenfranchisement post the creation of the Union. The ANC started off as an organisation which expressed demands through petitions and polite dialogue. But as the oppression got more brutal, their methods changed.

In 1949, the ANC introduced its Programme of Action, supporting strike action, protests and other forms of nonviolent resistance. Nelson Mandela became an important figure at this time. In 1952, the Defiance Campaign was started, calling people to break apartheid laws on purpose and offer themselves for arrest.

It was hoped such large-scale defiance would overwhelm government institutions and bring international censure. In the late 1950s, a group within the ANC, including Mandela, also called upon more violent methods.

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However, none of these was able to bring significant concessions for black South Africans. Resistance was met with increasing repression. In Sharpeville in 1960, during a large demonstration, the police opened fire and killed at least 69 black South Africans and wounded many more.

In the aftermath of the massacre, the government declared a state of emergency and arrested more than 18,000 people, including prominent black leaders.

Mandela would be arrested in 1962 and sentenced to life imprisonment on charges of sabotage and conspiracy to violently overthrow the government. He would spend the next 27 years in prison.

In 1976, students in Soweto took to the streets to protest against the imposition of Afrikaans as the only language of instruction. Police opened fire on protestors.

According to official reports, 23 people were killed, but the number of people who died is usually given as 176, with estimates of up to 700. The Soweto Uprising was followed by a series of brutal crackdowns on resisting organisations.

A movement for a multi-racial democracy

By the 1980s, anti-apartheid forces were largely united around a nonviolent resistance that could achieve maximum participation among non-whites and bring international pressure on the government.

Given the sheer power imbalance – military, economic and political – between the whites and blacks, this was seen as the only way to bring meaningful change.

Leaders like Archbishop Desmond Tutu became very popular not just among blacks but also among white South Africans during this period.

The latter half of the 1980s saw some of the largest and most impactful protests yet, with mass non-cooperation and strikes organised.

In addition to this, resistors also created alternative community-based institutions – such as community clinics and legal resource centres – to replace discriminatory government institutions.

Through direct confrontation and effective community institution building, by the late 1980s, the South African government had lost significant authority and legitimacy.

This culminated in the 1989 Defiance Campaign with multiracial peace marches across the country, including in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban.

Legal changes and a referendum

De Klerk came to power in 1989. A staunch conservative in his early days, people expected him to continue the apartheid, even as international pressure and internal resistance mounted.

However, in 1990, in a speech to the parliament, de Klerk announced that “the time to negotiate has arrived”. He lifted bans on political parties such as the ANC, freed thousands of prisoners including Mandela, and lifted the state of emergency that had been imposed amidst rising protests in the 1980s.

Upon his release, Mandela began negotiating for the end of apartheid. On March 17, 1992, a referendum among the white South African population ushered in a new era in South Africa, once and for all. While systemic disadvantages continue to impact black South Africans, an era of political freedom and legal equality was instituted in 1992.

End of the apartheid

It is important to note that while de Klerk is remembered as the man who ushered in the Apartheid's end, he did it for pragmatic rather than idealistic reasons.

In fact, de Klerk has been accused of overseeing some of the most horrific police excesses against protesters during his regime.

But years of internal protest, often violent, had ushered in deep divisions in white South Africa, weakening the white commitment to apartheid. Furthermore, international cultural and economic sanctions continued to have a major impact on the country which was also suffering economically.

Also, the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the "red scare" assuaged the West's fear that South Africa would fall under a communist regime if not for the apartheid.

It was a perfect storm and de Klerk saw the winds of change blowing. Rather than risk further social and economic upheaval in South Africa, he realised that the best course of action would be to try to get on top of the change.