



History

Modern humans have lived in what is today South Africa for over 100 000 years, and their ancestors for some 3,3 million years.

One site which is particularly rich in fossil remains, the area around the Sterkfontein caves near Johannesburg, is justifiably called the Cradle of Humankind.

Rock paintings

More recent evidence of early humans is the many vivid rock paintings which were created by small groups of Stone Age hunter-gatherers, the ancestors of the Khoekhoen and San.

Some 2 000 years ago, the Khoekhoen (the Hottentots of early European terminology) were pastoralists who had settled mostly along the coast, while the San (the Bushmen) were hunter-gatherers spread across the region. At this time, Bantu-speaking agropastoralists began arriving in southern Africa, spreading from the eastern lowlands to the Highveld.

At several archaeological sites there is evidence of sophisticated political and material cultures.

European contact

The first European settlement in southern Africa was established by the Dutch East India Company in Table Bay (Cape Town) in 1652. Created to supply passing ships, the colony grew quickly as Dutch farmers settled to grow produce. Shortly after the establishment of the colony, slaves were imported from East Africa, Madagascar and the East Indies.

Conflict

From the 1770s, colonists came into contact and inevitable conflict with Bantu-speaking chiefdoms some 800 km east of Cape Town. A century of intermittent warfare ensued during which the colonists gained ascendancy over the isiXhosa-speaking chiefdoms.

At approximately this time, in the areas beyond the reach of the colonists, a spate of state-building was being launched. The old order was upset and the Zulu kingdom emerged as a highly centralised state.

In the 1820s, the celebrated Zulu leader Shaka established sway over a vast area of south-east Africa.

As splinter groups from Shaka's Zulu nation conquered and absorbed communities in their path, the region experienced a fundamental disruption. Substantial states, such as Moshoeshoe's Lesotho and other Sotho-Tswana chiefdoms were established, partly for reasons of defence. This temporary disruption of life on the Highveld served to facilitate the expansion northwards of the original Dutch settlers' descendants, the Boer Voortrekkers, from the 1830s.

Occupation

In 1806, Britain reoccupied the Cape. As the colony prospered, the political rights of the various races were guaranteed, with slavery being abolished in 1838.

Throughout the 1800s, the boundaries of European influence spread eastwards. From the port of Durban, Natal settlers pushed northwards, further and further into the land of the Zulu.

From the mid-1800s, the Voortrekkers coalesced in two land-locked white-ruled republics, the South African Republic (Transvaal) and the Orange Free State.

The mineral revolution

The discovery of diamonds north of the Cape in the 1860s brought tens of thousands of people to the area around Kimberley. In 1871, Britain annexed the diamond fields. Independent African chiefdoms were systematically subjugated and incorporated. The most dramatic example was the Zulu War of 1879, which saw the Zulu state brought under imperial control, but only after King Cetshwayo's soldiers inflicted a celebrated defeat on British forces at Isandlwana.

Gold

The discovery of the Witwatersrand goldfields in 1886 was a turning point in the history of South Africa. The demand for franchise rights for English-speaking immigrants working on the new goldfields was the pretext Britain used to go to war with the Transvaal and Orange Free State in 1899.

The Boers initially inflicted some heavy defeats on the British but eventually the might of imperial Britain proved too strong for the guerilla bands and the war ended in 1902. Britain's scorched-earth policy included farm burnings and the setting up of concentration camps for non-combatants in which some 26 000 Boer women and children died.

The incarceration of black (including coloured) people in racially segregated camps has only recently been acknowledged in historical accounts of the war.

Union and opposition

In 1910, the Union of South Africa was created out of the Cape, Natal, Transvaal and Free State. It was to be essentially a white union.

Black opposition was inevitable, the African National Congress (ANC) being founded in 1912 to protest the exclusion of blacks from power. In 1921, the Communist Party came into being at a time of heightened militancy.

In the face of a groundswell of opposition to racially defined government, the seminal Natives Land Act was legislated in 1913. This defined the remnants of blacks' ancestral lands for African occupation. The homelands, as they were subsequently called, eventually comprised about 13% of South Africa's land. More discriminatory legislation – particularly relating to job reservation favouring whites, and the disenfranchisement of coloured voters in the Cape – was enacted. Meanwhile, Afrikaner nationalism, fuelled by job losses arising from worldwide recession, was on the march.

The rise of apartheid

After the Second World War, in 1948, the pro-Afrikaner National Party (NP) came to power with the ideology of apartheid, an even more rigorous and authoritarian approach than the previous segregationist policies.

While white South Africa was cementing its power, black opposition politics were evolving. In 1943, a younger, more determined political grouping came to the fore with the launch of the ANC Youth League, a development which was to foster the leadership of figures such as Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo and Walter Sisulu.

Repression

In 1961, the NP Government under Prime Minister HF Verwoerd declared South Africa a republic after winning a whites-only referendum.

A new concern with racial purity was apparent in laws prohibiting interracial sex and in provisions for population registration requiring that every South African be assigned to one discrete racial category or another.

Residential segregation was enforced, with whole communities being uprooted and forced into coloured and black 'group areas'.

Separate development

At a time when much of Africa was on the verge of independence, the South African Government was devising its policy of separate development, dividing the African population into artificial ethnic 'nations', each with its own 'homeland' and the prospect of 'independence'. The truth was that the rural reserves were by this time thoroughly degraded by overpopulation and soil erosion.

Forced removals from 'white' areas affected some 3,5 million people, and vast rural slums were created in the homelands. The pass laws and influx control were extended and harshly enforced.

The introduction of apartheid policies coincided with the adoption by the ANC in 1949 of its Programme of Action, expressing the renewed militancy of the 1940s.

The programme embodied a rejection of white domination and a call for action in the form of protests, strikes and demonstrations.

Defiance

The Defiance Campaign of the early 1950s carried mass mobilisation to new heights under the banner of non-violent resistance to the pass laws. In 1955, the Freedom Charter was drawn up at the Congress of the People in Soweto. The charter enunciated the principles of the struggle, binding the movement to a culture of human rights and non-racialism.

Soon the mass-based organisations, including the ANC and the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), were banned. Matters came to a head at Sharpeville in March 1960 when 69 PAC anti-pass demonstrators were killed. A state of emergency was imposed, and detention without trial was introduced.

Struggle days

Leaders of the black political organisations at this time either went into exile or were arrested. In this climate, the ANC and PAC abandoned their long-standing commitment to non-violent resistance and turned to armed struggle, waged from the independent countries to the north.

Top leaders still inside the country, including members of the ANC's newly formed military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation), were arrested in 1963. At the 'Rivonia Trial', eight ANC leaders, including Mandela, convicted of sabotage (instead of treason, the original charge), were sentenced to life imprisonment.

While draconian measures kept the lid on activism for much of the 1960s, the resurgence of resistance politics in the early 1970s was dramatic.

The year 1976 marked the beginning of a sustained anti-apartheid revolt. In June, school pupils in Soweto rose up against apartheid education, followed by youth uprisings all around the country. Strong, legal vehicles for the democratic forces tested the state, whose response until then had been invariably heavy-handed repression.

Reform

Shaken by the scale of protest and opposition, the government embarked on a series of limited reforms in the early 1980s, an early example being the recognition of black trade unions.

In 1983, the Constitution was reformed to allow the coloured and Indian minorities limited participation in separate and subordinate houses of parliament, which enjoyed limited support.

In 1986, the hated pass laws were scrapped. At this time, the international community strengthened its support for the anti-apartheid cause.

However, these steps fell far short of the democratic aspirations of the majority of South Africans. Mass resistance increasingly challenged the apartheid state, which resorted to intensified repression accompanied, however, by eventual recognition that apartheid could not be sustained.

Apartheid's last days

In February 1990, newly elected President FW de Klerk announced the unbanning of the liberation movements and the release of political prisoners, notably Mandela.

Democracy at last

After a difficult negotiation process, South Africa held its first democratic election in April 1994 under an interim Constitution.

The ANC emerged with a 62% majority. South Africa, now welcomed back into the international community, was divided into nine new provinces in place of the four provinces and 10 'homelands' that existed previously. In terms of the interim Constitution, the NP and Inkatha Freedom Party participated in a government of national unity under Mandela, South Africa's first democratically elected president.

The ANC-led Government embarked on a programme to promote the reconstruction and development of the country and its institutions.

The second democratic election, in 1999, saw the ANC increasing its majority to a point just short of two-thirds of the total vote. South Africa was launched into the post-Mandela era under the presidency of Thabo Mbeki.

In the election on 14 April 2004, the ANC won the national vote with 69,68%. The inauguration of South Africa's third democratically elected president on 27 April 2004 was combined with the celebration of 10 Years of Freedom and attended by heads of state and government delegations from across the world. In his speech, President Mbeki vowed to fight poverty as a central part of the national effort to build the new South Africa.

The sense of national unity among South Africans and confidence in the direction of the country have since 2004 been at levels not seen since the dawn of freedom in 1994. In this context of an unprecedented confluence of encouraging possibilities and confidence, described by President Mbeki as the beginning of South Africa's Age of Hope, the conditions for a national effort for faster and shared growth have never been better.

Working with its social partners, the Government has developed AsgiSA, the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative for South Africa, systematically to raise the trajectory of growth to an average of at least 6% between 2010 and 2014. Such rates of growth, combined with improved labour absorption, will ensure that South Africa is able to halve unemployment and poverty by the end of the Second Decade of Freedom.

The fabric of South African society is continually changing, creating not only new challenges but also greater stability and peace, and laying the foundation for a society in which the individual and collective human potential of the nation can come to full fruition.