



SOUTH AFRICA

Area: 470,900 square miles **Population:** 59,750,000

Capitals: Pretoria (administrative); Cape Town (legislative); Bloemfontein (judicial)

Ethnic Groups: Black (79%): Zulu, Xhosa, North Sotho, South Sotho, Tswana, Shangaan-Tsonga, Ndebele, and Venda; white (9.6%): Afrikaners (Afrikaans-speaking descendants of Dutch, German, and French settlers) and English-speakers; mixed race (8.9%); Asian/Indian (2.5%)

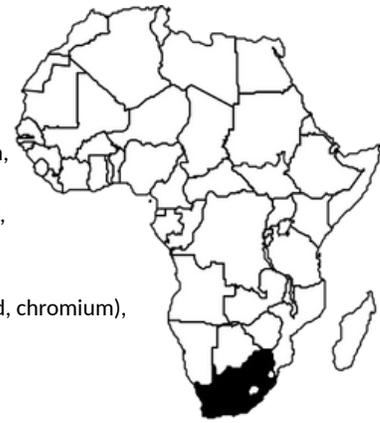
Languages: 11 official languages: Afrikaans, English, Ndebele, Pedi, Sotho, Swazi, Tsonga, Tswana, Venda, Xhosa, and Zulu **Religion:** Christian (80%), Islam (2%), Hindu (2%), other or none (15%)

Life Expectancy: 63.62 years **Literacy:** 95%

Economy: Agric: corn, wheat, sugarcane, fruits, vegetables, beef; Industry: mining (platinum, gold, chromium), automobile assembly, metalworking; Exports: gold, other minerals and metals, food, chemicals

Gini (Income Inequality) Index: 62 (comp.US=41.1)

Gender Inequality Index: 0.406 (Medium #114/189; comp. US=0.204 Very High)



Earliest Histories

“The Sun is Thrown into the Sky” Evidence about South Africa before the arrival of Europeans comes from archaeology and oral tradition. Around 1871, one of the earliest recorded African stories of southern Africa was told to European ethnographers by //Kabbo, of the San (/Xam-ka!) people. In an ancient creation myth, //Kabbo recounted that his people first inhabited the Earth, where their children coaxed the Sun into coming out of his dwelling. At the instruction of their mothers, the children lifted the Sun and threw him into the sky. In the long history of South Africa, women and children have continued to play integral roles.

There was some truth to //Kabbo's story: Archaeological records have confirmed the earliest fossils of modern Homo sapiens at sites in South Africa. Among the area's most ancient people were the San, a primarily hunter-gatherer group who lived there in relative abundance on the eve of European arrival. The Khoikhoi, another of the earliest peoples of South Africa, were pastoralists. Bantu-speaking people include Zulu and Xhosa who migrated to South Africa around the fourth century CE, bringing agriculture and iron technology.

The Colonial Era

During the 1500s, the Cape of southern Africa became a key cog in the overseas trade between West and East. By the early 17th century, English and Dutch ships used the supply port on their voyages to India. In 1652, the Dutch established a supply station for the Dutch East India Company. This would become Cape Town. European settlement brought tremendous upheaval and disruption. The colony quickly became marked by a very diverse population and marred with racial stratification. The Dutch East India Company imported slaves from India, Southeast Asia, and other parts of Africa and set them to work in the colony. During the 18th century, conflicts between Dutch colonists (known as Boers or “farmers” and, later, Afrikaners or “Men of Africa”) and Africans resulted in almost complete extermination of the San and the decimation of others forced into servitude.

Britain took control of the Cape Colony by 1814, driving the Boers further into the interior and increasing European contact with Africans. Shaka Zulu formed the Zulu state in the early 1800s, and Zulus fiercely resisted European conquest until eventually succumbing to the British in 1879. AmaXhosa (people of Xhosaland) were eventually defeated, in part due to the devastating aftermath of the actions of a teenaged Xhosa prophetess named Nongqawuse. In 1856, she prophesized that the ancestors would return from the dead and help drive out the European invaders if the amaXhosa killed their cattle, destroyed crops, and stopped farming. Many, especially women (who held agricultural roles in Xhosa society), heeded her prophecy. Nongqawuse's uncle, using her as a medium, became the leader of a millenarian movement. Famine plagued the Xhosa from 1857 to 1858, and some historians view the catastrophic response to the prophecies as one reason the British were able to defeat the amaXhosa. Her story persists in historical memory and several authors have drawn inspiration from it, including the acclaimed South African author and playwright Zakes Mda in his novel titled *The Heart of Redness* (2000).

The discovery of diamonds (1867) and gold (1886) intensified the region's industrialization and exploitation of labor and capital. As British settlers poured into the region seeking mining wealth, resentment followed. Conflict between British and Boers culminated in the Boer War (1899-1902). British “scorched earth” policies destroyed vast swaths of arable land. Boers and Africans (mostly laborers on Boer farms) were forced into concentration camps, where tens of thousands died due to deplorable conditions. The racial discrimination and violence of the end of the 19th century set the stage for a divisive 20th century.

After Britain's victory, the white residents of southern Africa created the Union of South Africa, a British and Boer-led dominion of the British empire, in 1910. Segregation was the norm. Africans were almost completely disenfranchised. White leaders passed restrictive laws that limited land ownership for Africans, forcing much of the population off ancestral lands and into “native reserves” and labor pools. Pass Laws restricted freedom of movement for African men in an effort to keep them out of the country's burgeoning cities and centers of commerce, effectively barring them from paths to wealth generation. In response, the South African Native National Congress (later the African National Congress or ANC) formed in 1912 and began legal challenges to the legitimacy of white rule that would extend throughout the twentieth century. South African novelists such as Peter Abrahams (*Mine Boy*, 1946) and Alan Paton (*Cry the Beloved Country*, 1948) drew attention to the plight of black Africans and the Union of South Africa's gaping racial and economic inequality.

“You have struck against a rock”: Apartheid and African Resistance

In the years after World War II, when other world colonies successfully pushed for independence from Europe, South Africa went the opposite direction. Fueled by fears over Black African empowerment, the hardline Afrikaner Nationalist Party won power in 1948 elections and began implementing the system of apartheid, an Afrikaans word for “separate” or “apartness.” Apartheid policies sought absolute racial separation in nearly all aspects of South African life, enforced with crushing brutality by the state police force. In 1956, the government initiated the legislation that would extend pass laws to African women. In response, African women joined with white and “Coloured” (mixed-race) women in broad protests demanding their repeal. They drew on gendered language, arguing that the laws would break up families, disrupt their roles as mothers, and expose women to predatory pass-searching policemen. Though the government proceeded with the new law, the protestors’ iconic rallying cry inspired generations of women’s resistance there and around Africa: “You have tampered with the women, you have struck against a rock.”

In 1976, students in Soweto led a march to protest a government decision that school instruction be led in Afrikaans, a language that Black Africans equated with their white oppressors. School children marched in the streets, carrying signs, chanting, and singing. As thousands of students rallied together, police opened fire into the crowd. Hundreds of children were injured and two were killed. A photographer captured the moment when an older boy, wailing in anguish, carried the limp body of twelve-year-old Hector Pieterse, killed by police. A memorial near the site commemorates him as one of many whose bravery helped end apartheid.

Many around the world looked on in horror at the police response to the Soweto Student Uprising. The infamous moment, along with so many other examples of atrocities of the apartheid period, drove global action. Anti-apartheid protests gathered steam in South Africa and around the world. Many countries joined a global boycott of South African goods. Under the Afrikaner National Party, South Africa had become an international pariah. Pressure mounted for a free and democratic election, and the release of Nelson Mandela from his cell on Robben Island. Mandela had been jailed in 1964, alongside other leaders of the militant wing of the ANC, but finally in 1990 he was freed. He and F.W. de Klerk, the country’s Afrikaner president, worked to reform the government and dismantle apartheid. For their efforts, they were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1993. Mandela became South Africa’s first democratically elected Black president in 1994, ushering in a new era of “truth and reconciliation” for the country.

The New South Africa

In the years since the fall of apartheid, equality for Black South Africans has been enshrined in law and public policy. Tourist attractions include the world-famous wildlife reserves, Mandela’s prison cell, and renowned surfing. Since 1994, a relatively stable democracy has survived. However, poverty and income inequality continue to be the reality for many black South Africans. Fully addressing the injustices of the colonial and apartheid periods has proven to be a thorn for the ANC leadership. The issues of land reform and rural violence have been particularly challenging for the government as the process of land restitution has been slow. In 2018, white South Africans still owned over 70% of private land. The impact of global capitalism and health disparities have continued to rage across the African nation with the largest concentration of private wealth on the continent.

----- Written by Daniel Kotin (July 2021)

Further Reading and Viewing

Field, Connie. “Have You Heard from Johannesburg.” 2010. Clarity Films.

Crais, Clifton and Thomas V. McClendon, eds. 2014. *The South Africa Reader*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

“South Africa: Overcoming Apartheid, Building Democracy.” <https://overcomingapartheid.msu.edu/index.php>

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