

South Africa

Principal protagonists



African National Congress (government of South Africa).

Potential for coercive measures to reduce White influence in commercial and land ownership. Racial tensions between Xhosa and Zulu, Indian, Coloured and regional minority groups. Violence against immigrants.

Nature of conflict

Resource accessibility and race relations issues.

☠ c12,000 in political violence, 1948-1994.

👤 Refugee pressure an issue. (4m Zimbabwean refugees/immigrants.)

🏠 Very significant agricultural and mineral resources; sophisticated banking and financial sector.

Population/ethnic composition

44m. Zulu 23.8%, Xhosa 17.6%, Pedi 9.4%, Tswana 8.2%, Sotho 7.9%, Tsonga 4.4%, Swazi 2.7%, White 9.6%, Coloured 8.9%, Asian 2.5%.

Territorial extent

Republic of South Africa: 1,221,037 km².

Timeline

- 7 Apr 1652: Earliest European colony (Dutch Cape Colony) established.
- 11 Jan-4 Jul, 1879: Zululand annexed by Britain at conclusion of Anglo-Zulu war.
- 11 Oct 1899-11 Apr 1902: Boer republics of Transvaal and Orange Free State annexed by Britain during Second Boer War.
- 31 May 1910: Independent Union of South Africa within British Empire.
- 4 Jun 1948: National Party elected. Start of *apartheid* era.
- 10 May 1994: Nelson Mandela elected President of South Africa in first full multi-racial elections.
- Apr-May 2008: Widespread violence against Zimbabwean and other immigrants.

Current status

Ethnic tensions may surface as significant issues in the future.



Prior to the mid-1990s it is inconceivable that a volume on ethnic conflict would not need to devote a considerable section to the threat of major violence in South Africa. Following the dismantling of the *apartheid* system and elections on a full adult franchise of all races in 1994, South Africa has thus far evaded the dire predictions for race war which on occasions in its recent history seemed all too likely. After years of political and economic exclusion from the world mainstream, South Africa has rapidly regained both its continental leadership role and its status as the regional financial and economic powerhouse. Nevertheless, a number of ethnically related issues, which may flare into more serious problems in the future, should be highlighted.

South Africa was one of the first African countries to be settled in large numbers by Europeans, who initially came mainly from the Netherlands where, as 'Boers' ('farmers') they established remote autonomous communities and became the only European colonists to evolve their own language, Afrikaans. After the Napoleonic wars, the British established themselves in the Cape region and in Natal, in the north-east. Both Boers and British periodically fought wars of territorial expansion against the local Black nations, most famously the Anglo-Zulu war of 1879.

Following the Second Boer War of 1899-2, the UK annexed the Boer republics of Transvaal and Orange Free State and united them with Britain's colonies of Cape Colony and Natal. In 1910, South Africa achieved independence as a Dominion under the British crown. From the outset, race

relations dominated the politics of the new state – both in terms of rivalry between Boers and British, and between White 'Europeans' and the Black population. In 1912 the African National Congress (ANC) was formed to press for political and land ownership rights for the 'native' population. (The 1913 Land Act prevented Blacks from buying land outside established Native Reserves.) The 1948 election of the National Party ushered in the era of *apartheid* – 'separate development' – and legislation designed to physically separate the races both in residency and, through the Sexual Immorality Act, in the bedroom. In the early 1960s, the ANC, having resorted to violence, saw its leaders, including Nelson Mandela, either imprisoned or exiled.

Apartheid was condemned for its economic inefficiencies and bureaucratic absurdities as well as its basic inhu-

manity, while many of the day-to-day restrictions of 'petty *apartheid*' – such as separate public toilets and travel facilities – simply served to insult and demean the majority of the population. Despite the artificial constraints imposed on society by *apartheid*, South Africa was a politically and economically freer society (for citizens of all races) than the majority of African states, but this did not disguise the basic injustices of the system. Nevertheless, a crucial distinction can be drawn between South Africa and many other African states. Even under *apartheid*, South Africa had democratic institutions – multiple political parties, a free press, a functioning civil service and a relatively free judiciary. What was denied was full access to those institutions by all citizens. To that extent, South Africa's ethnic conflict more resembled the 1960s civil rights movement in the US – i.e., a demand for inclusion in the existing civic institutions of the state – albeit on a larger scale.

Under *apartheid*, a series of homelands (the so-called 'bantustans') was created for the various Black ethnic groups. Four states – Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Ciskei and Venda – became independent under this system, but were not internationally recognized. The long term aspiration of the *apartheid* planners was a 'constellation' of ethnically predicated states, theoretically equal in status, but in which in practice the core White South African state would be pre-eminent.

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s the tenability of *apartheid* was eroded against a background of largely cosmetic sanctions by the outside world and by domestic civil unrest. In 1990 the ANC and other militant organizations were legalized and Nelson Mandela released after 27 years of imprisonment. Mandela subsequently led the ANC to victory in South Africa's first truly multi-racial elections in 1994. The ANC has held power ever since, with Thabo Mbeki succeeding Mandela as President in 1999.

Thanks in no small measure to the moderating influence of Nelson Mandela, the ANC did not succumb to the temptations either of wholesale ethnic retribution nor of outright Marxism. Nevertheless, the post 1994 perception amongst many of South Africa's Whites – and to an extent this is shared by elements of the Coloured (mixed race) and Indian communities – is one of rapidly rising crime, corruption, and declining standards in the face of vigorous 'Affirmative Action' and official Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) programmes designed to accelerate the appointment of Blacks into all fields of commercial, academic and political life. Faced with what many regard as institutionalized racial discrimination against Whites in the fields of employment, promotion opportunities, and access to higher education, a fifth of the White population has left South Africa since 1994, taking valuable skills and commercial resources with them.

In the mid-1990s, fierce fighting between Zulus and Xhosa ANC members threatened to derail the democratization process. Although a 'compromise' was established

whereby the mainly Zulu Inkarta Freedom Party retained local control over the KwaZulu-Natal province and a stake in national government, tensions persist between Xhosas and Zulus. Jacob Zuma, elected in December 2007 as president of the ANC and thus (corruption charges notwithstanding) likely to the next President of South Africa, openly played on his Zulu credentials during his populist election campaign.

The Vhavenda, in the north of South Africa, are another group to cite grievances over the protection of indigenous religious sites, intrusive mining, and traditional land ownership. The Venda homeland was one of the four to accept independence under the *apartheid* system and the Vhavenda feel they are being punished for that decision. The Coloured population continues to occupy the somewhat anomalous position they held during the *apartheid* era: strongly religious and Afrikaans-speaking, they have little in common with the secular, English-speaking ANC. The Indian population, concentrated in Durban and the east coast, continues to occupy a disproportionately large space in the commercial, legal and civil service spaces, and this may breed, as in other societies, resentment from the Black population.

The deteriorating situation in neighbouring Zimbabwe (See 2.56) prompted a refugee emergency that was the trigger for the most serious inter-communal violence in South Africa since 1994. Over 40 deaths and up to 70,000 displacements resulted from rioting in April 2008 that also targeted Somali, Mozambican, and other immigrants. Troops had to be deployed in Johannesburg and Cape Town, and the Western Cape province declared itself a disaster area.

In September 2006 Archbishop Desmond Tutu – a long-standing critic of *apartheid* – voiced his alarm at the direction being undertaken by the new South Africa, speaking of his fears not only at corruption but at the possibility of ethnic unrest. While in the immediate future such fears may seem over-stated, they reflect a genuine undercurrent of concern. For South Africa, longer term, the key question is whether the general pragmatism which has prevailed since 1994 will continue or be eroded by sectarian demands from groups who feel they have not sufficiently benefited from the transition to democracy.