The Anti-Apartheid Struggle in South Africa (1912–1992)

Lester R. Kurtz, Ph.D*

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Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance

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*Lester R. Kurtz is a Professor at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at George Mason University.

Conflict Summary:

The iconic struggle between the apartheid regime of South Africa and those who resisted it illustrates the complexity of some cases of civil resistance. Originally the use of civil resistance against apartheid was based on Gandhian ideas, which originated in South Africa in 1906 where Gandhi was a lawyer working for an Indian trading firm. Soon the African National Congress (ANC), founded in 1912, became the major force opposing the apartheid system's oppression of the 80% non-European population of the country. Using mostly legal tactics of protest during its first four decades, the ANC became more militant in the early 1950s and began using nonviolent direct action.

White South Africans (Afrikaners) monopolized control over the state and the economy, including rich natural resources such as a third of the world's known gold reserves. The Afrikaners developed an explicit theology and philosophy of white racial superiority and a legal and economic system enforced by a modern military and police force that deliberately excluded nonwhites from economic and political power. Nevertheless, the system became increasingly reliant upon nonwhite labor and isolated from international diplomacy and trade.

Discouraged about the lack of results from their nonviolent campaign, Nelson Mandela and others called for an armed uprising, creating the *Umkhonto We Sizwe* ("Spear of the Nation") that paralleled the nonviolent resistance. That, too, failed to tear down the apartheid system, and in the end a concerted grassroots nonviolent civil resistance movement in coalition with international support and sanctions forced the white government to negotiate.

On 17 March 1992 two-thirds of South Africa's white voters approved a negotiated end of the minority regime and the apartheid system. Nelson Mandela was elected as the President of the new South Africa in the first free elections by the entire population.

The decades of struggle saw the ebb and flow of a wide variety of strategic actions within the anti-apartheid movement. American theologian Walter Wink (1987: 4) suggests the movement was "probably the largest grassroots eruption of diverse nonviolent strategies in a single struggle in human history."

Political History:

The timeline of this conflict begins with the founding of Cape Town in 1652 by the Dutch East India Company as a way station between the Netherlands and the East Indies. As it developed into a settlement, it was populated by the European ancestors of the Afrikaners, who eventually were the white minority comprising less than 20 percent of the population but who had nearly complete control of the nation's government and economy. As resistance to the system

increased, increasingly-restrictive legislation was passed; nonwhites were forcibly removed from their homes and relocated to segregated neighborhoods, and any hint of dissidence was repressed, from the banning of individuals and organizations from public life to the imposition of martial law.

After decades of resistance to the explicitly-racist system, questions and even defections from the white power elite emerged in the 1980s as business leaders, aware of the need for a high-quality work force and in an effort to build up a small sector of the black population, began to despair of the failure of modest reforms and increased repression. Questions even began to emerge within the Dutch-Reformed Church, which fashioned the apartheid theology that had legitimated the regime (see Kuperus 1999).

In the end, it was the paradox of the regime's being both extraordinarily powerful and highly vulnerable that gave nonviolent resistance its power (Zunes 1999). Despite its powerful security forces, mineral wealth and industrial capacity, apartheid South Africa was dependent on its nonwhite labor force, southern African neighbors, and international ties with the industrial West. As these pillars withdrew their support the regime became unsustainable.

Strategic Actions[1]:

The ANC, created in 1912, was the major institutional vehicle of the resistance, at first emphasizing legal forms of protest and shifting to a more militant nonviolent direct action campaign in the early 1950s and then advocating violent resistance, along with its revival Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), founded in 1959. The violent resistance was limited to occasional bombings of government facilities and avoidance of civilian deaths. As Zunes (1999) correctly observes, the armed struggle may have harmed the movement, weakening the nonviolent campaigns (successfully linked to the nonviolent movement) and justifying the repression of all resistance efforts. Armed resistance against the continent's most powerful military and a highly armed white citizenry fearing a racial war was never a serious threat.

In the 1970s, increased labor militancy and community support for opposition forces, along with the successful 1973 strikes in Durban, demonstrated the regime's vulnerability: brick and tile workers walked off the job one January morning, prompting first transport workers and then industrial and municipal labor to follow suit. By early February, 30,000 workers were on strike in Durban. The apartheid regime relied on black labor to keep the economy going and the strikes showed that widespread discontent could be mobilized to disrupt the work that kept the regime in power. Durban's labor activism in turn helped to inspire strikes elsewhere and then a student uprising that included a 1976 Soweto march that the police responded to by shooting a thirteen-year-old boy. In what became known as the "Soweto Uprising", young people escalated by smashing windows and setting fire to schools and government buildings, to which the police

upped the ante by shooting at students everywhere, leading to more than sixty fatalities (with two white men killed).

In light of the apartheid regime's military superiority, by the early 1980s, anti-apartheid forces were virtually united around a nonviolent resistance that could achieve maximum participation among nonwhites, divide the white community and move some toward acting on behalf of non-whites, and bring international pressures to bear on the government (Sharp 1980: 163).

Drawing upon the Black Consciousness Movement led by dissident Steve Biko (who died due to brutal police treatment while in custody), a mass democratic movement emerged in the 1980s with an informal alliance between the ANC, the United Democratic Front (UDF, launched in 1983)[2] and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) calling for a multiracial democracy led by the ANC. One of the UDF's most prominent leaders was Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and it gained considerable support in the white community including from the South African Council of Churches.

In 1985, nonviolent pressure continued to build, with 27 year-old Mkhuseli Jack organizing boycotts of white-owned businesses in the city of Port Elizabeth. The boycotters presented a series of demands: the integration of public facilities, the removal of troops from the black townships and an end to workplace discrimination (Ackerman and DuVall 2000). The boycotts were so powerful that the regime responded with the first declaration of a state of emergency in 23 years in an effort to stop the movement's momentum, but with little effect. A three-day general strike in June 1988 mobilized more than three million workers and students, paralyzing industry, followed by an even larger general strike in August 1989.

In 1989, resisters also resurrected the 1950s Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign[3] that involved engaging in the civil disobedience of intolerable apartheid legislation and practices such as banning dissidents (which restricted their travel and activities and required them to report to authorities periodically as well as prevented the press from quoting them). It encouraged noncooperation with the tricameral legislative system, which was meant to co-opt dissidents and to repair the apartheid government's damaged reputation with the international community by giving non-whites token representation in the government.[4]

In addition to direct confrontation with the regime, resistors also created alternative community-based institutions—such as cooperatives, community clinics, legal resource centers, and other organizations—that increasingly marginalized and replaced official governmental institutions. Many black South Africans were hesitant to get politically active after the 1977 crackdown following the Soweto Uprising, but were attracted to the organization around community problems such as housing, escalating rents, sanitation, and other local issues (see Ackerman and DuVall 2000). The government responded with a ban on international funding of such

organizations, but this did not have much impact on their activities. As the decade neared its end, the government had lost control in virtually every sphere of apartheid, with banned ANC flags flying, public facilities renamed, government officials confronted by school children, jailed activists holding hunger strikes, and clergy illegally marrying mixed-race couples (see Zunes 1999: 223).

The resistance culminated in the 1989 Defiance Campaign with multiracial peace marches in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Durban, and throughout the country. Even business leaders and members of the white establishment such as the mayor of Cape Town joined the movement (Smuts and Westcott 1991). The struggle moved to the negotiating table, with anti-apartheid forces holding the upper hand but fashioning a democratic solution that also set the stage for a process of reconciliation.

In total, the number of tactics used during the anti-apartheid struggle was enormous, and included the following:

Protest and Persuasion

- Mass demonstrations, marches;
- Public declarations such as The Freedom Charter, adopted at the Congress of the People, Kliptown, on 26 June 1955;
- Funeral marches and orations as occasions for protesting apartheid and remembering victims of repression, especially when demonstrations were banned;
- Alternative press and advertising;
- Affidavits as a way of circumventing censorship (e.g., the South African Catholic Bishops Conference used affidavits for a book, Police Conduct During Township Protests in 1984);
- Memorials and anniversaries (e.g., church bells rung and vigils were held to commemorate 1960 Sharpeville protestors shot by police, and Soweto Day was declared to commemorate the 1976 uprising);
- Lighting candles every night during the Christmas season;
- Music was a major feature of the South African movement—singing, dancing, and chanting freedom slogans was common;
- UN General Assembly Resolutions;
- A register of Artists, Actors and Others who have performed in South Africa was created as part of an international cultural boycott;
- Symbolic clothing:
    - Green, black and gold clothing symbolizing the banned ANC, and was worn even in court during trials;
    - Wearing ANC t-shirts;

    - A black armband worn in Parliament by Independent MP Jan van Eck mourning 40 years of National Party rule;
    - Naked protest parade of 200 men and women against an exhibition of electronic weaponry in 1982;
- "Services of witness" called by Archbishop Tutu inviting "banned" resisters to participate;
- University students in 1987 used chairs to form a profane word large enough to be read by a circling police helicopter (a photograph appeared in the Weekly Mail);
- Flag burning, replacing the South African flag with the ANC flag;
- Graffiti: political slogans in public places to circumvent censorship;
- Humor: protestors wearing "Stop the Call-up" t-shirts to protest conscription were ordered to stop building a sand castle on the beach, leading to jokes about such activities as subversive
- Religious pilgrimages and worship services;
- "Keening"—public weeping and wailing by women outside the gates of parliament;
- Kneeling—marchers fell to their knees and begged the police to withdraw from their township; after negotiations, a woman leading the protest asked the crowd to turn back and the commanding officer withdrew his troops;
- Motorcades (e.g., buses, vans, and cars would drive into a city center during a boycott of white shops);
- Negotiations with political officials as pressure from international and domestic anti-apartheid forces reached its apex.

Noncooperation

- Strikes and "stay-aways" organized by labor groups, especially the Congress of South African Trade Unions;
- Economic boycotts such as those organized by Mkhuseli Jack and others in Port Elizabeth;
- School boycotts;
- International sanctions, divestment, and boycotts;
- Sports and cultural boycotts;
- Rent boycotts;
- Establishment of alternative institutions – e.g.,
    - The National Education Crisis Committee,
    - Street committees and area committees,
    - People's courts,
    - Alternative parks named after movement heroes (e.g., Nelson Mandela Park, Steve Biko Park);
- Inter-racial bridge-building, social visits as social disobedience;

- Civil disobedience:
    - A South African Council of Churches resolution (July 1987) questioned the government's legitimacy and laws such as the Group Areas Act, the Education Acts and the Separate Amenities Act
- Use of an alternative birth registration system advocated by the South African Council of Churches defying the Population Registration Act;
- The United States Chamber of Commerce proposed a civil disobedience program for businesses in South Africa;
- Hunger strikes by political prisoners (1989) resulting in the release of hundreds of detainees and increased caution in detention without trial;
- Refusal to serve in the South African military (leading to arrests of conscientious objectors);
- Informal "Unbanning" of themselves by resisters who had been banned by the regime (which restricted their travel and activities and required them to report to authorities periodically as well as prevented the press from quoting them);
- Clergy married couples forbidden to marry by the Prevention of Mixed Marriages Act
- School officials allowed non-white or mixed-race students to enroll in their all-white schools

Nonviolent Intervention

- Archbishop Desmond Tutu led a protest march to a whites-only beach in the Western Cape (1989);
- Non-whites showed up at white hospitals and medical stations for medical treatment;
- The National Union of Mineworkers promoted a lunchtime sit-in at an all-white canteen, and had black African workers use whites-only changing rooms and toilets, buses, as part of the 1989 Defiance Campaign;
- Marching without permits
- When "Run for Peace" joggers were ordered to disperse, they did so by running away from the police but along the planned route (1985)
- Picnicking at the whites-only Boksburg Lake in defiance of apartheid regulations

Ensuing Events:

South Africa now has a democratic government and universal suffrage allowing all South African citizens to vote and hold political office. Nevertheless, a large proportion of its nonwhite population suffers grinding poverty and the hopelessness engendered by unmet high expectations, provoking widespread violence, crime, and civil unrest.

Although the nonwhite population gained what former Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere called "flag independence" by gaining the vote and electing an ANC-dominated government, the country's economy, civil service, and military remain largely dominated by the white minority, forcing continued compromise and power struggles. The difficult transition was facilitated in part by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission headed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, which attempted to repair the gap between the races by getting the ugly truth of the apartheid regime out into the open, enacting sentences on the worst offenders, and then seeking to find ways of reconciling the conflicting parties.

Endnotes:

1. For more details on the anti-apartheid movement's strategies and tactics, see Smuts and Westcott (1991).
2. The UDF was a loose coalition of trade unions, church and youth groups, cultural organizations and civil society organizations created in part due to the government's banning of the ANC and other hardline repressive measures (See *A Diplomat's Handbook*). By 1983 the UDF had become the primary instrument for mobilizing the opposition to the apartheid regime.
3. The Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign of 1952 had resulted in the African National Congress mushrooming from a small organization of 7,000 to a mass movement with 100,000 members.
4. The tricameral legislature created parallel but unequal parliaments for the "coloured" and Indian populations (in addition to the existing white legislature) but excluded the black population altogether (see Zunes 1999).

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