

How South Africa Democratized

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In 1948, the National Party introduced the apartheid system in South Africa where it lasted until the early 1990s, at which time South Africa had a series of events that ultimately transitioned the nation to democracy. Huntington tries to explain democratic transitions, like South Africa, by who the primary movers are that push democratization and initiate change. The three main mover look at pressures from below, above, or through a bargaining process (Huntington 1993, 159). South Africa is a unique case for democratic transition where it combines aspects of pressure from below and also pressures from above to initiate the start of change before it finally uses a bargaining method to ultimately transition to democracy.

Pressure From Below

The '80s were a period where pressure from below for democracy was its highest in South Africa. In South Africa's case, popular protest was amassed along with the opposition forces. Tensions rose in 1983, when the National Party (NP), who represented the once ruling whites, and the current South African Prime Minister, P.W. Botha, created a tri-cameral parliament amid pressure to reform (SAHO 2011, "The 1980s"). The NP saw the tri-cameral parliament as a solution; however, it only "included limited representation of South Africans classified 'Coloured' and 'Indian' but excluded Blacks" thus not challenging the apartheid system (SAHO 2011, "The 1980s"). Ordinary South Africans, along with rising opposition groups like The United Democratic Front, responded with increased mass rallies, protests, strikes, and boycotts against the apartheid regime showing that a majority of South Africans wanted to change.

However, the pressure from below was not always through peaceful means. During this time, in addition to the mass protests, the pressure from below was also supported by a radical faction of the African National Congress (ANC), who represented the majority of blacks and

Asian South Africans, was their guerilla forces, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) who made symbolic attacks on both “hard” and “soft” targets (SAHO 2011, “The people”). However, all of these various pressures from below were unable to move the nation to democracy, because in Huntington’s argument for transitions of democracy, successful pressure from below rarely happens with violence or a full revolution (Huntington 1993, 120). Peaceful methods can help bring change from below, but the use of violence as a form of below pressure in South Africa did not succeed in causing a transition to democracy.

Pressure From Above

Pressure from above was initiated when FW de Klerk was elected President in 1989 because he recognized that South Africa could not continue with the apartheid system due to significant international factors. De Klerk, who was once an avid supporter of the apartheid system, was now supporting a change in the political system to democracy, largely due to the pressure from international actors. Throughout the ’60s and ’70s, “major social movements... challenged racial and other forms of inequality and transformed societies in the United States, the UK, France, and elsewhere” leaving South Africa’s apartheid system to be “an offensive holdover from an earlier era of colonialism and racist oppression” (Facing History & Ourselves, N.d.). The pressuring governments changed their policies towards South Africa by increasing their sense of isolation with “divestments by corporations... sports boycotts and international condemnation” (Facing History & Ourselves, N.d.). In addition, the United States enacted H.R.4868, Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986, which helped to psychologically affect South Africa by pushing for change against the apartheid system (Levy 1999, 3). Ultimately, international pressure began to hurt the South African economy and de Klerk needed to institute change. He saw important international benefits and incentives that motivated him to push for

democratization. Overall, International pressures were a crucial factor in pushing the elite in power to begin to implement change, but the duality of the system caused the pressure from above to need to negotiate with the opposition pressure from below.

The Bargain

The South African transition to democracy ultimately came about through the use of the bargaining method to complete the regime change. The two main sides of this bargaining process were the NP and the ANC. The international pressures that were economically and psychologically isolating South Africa and the increasing violence together helped to initiate the split between soft liners and hardliners (Huntington 1993, 160). De Klerk recognized that “apartheid was incapable of reform: it had to be jettisoned” and Nelson Mandela recognized that the ANC’s military forces, the MK, “were unlikely to be decisive in forcing the government to the negotiating table” (Welsh 1994, 222). On both sides, there was a recognition that the conflict had stalemated and if continued the cost would be extensive; thus, the bargaining process was able to begin.

A small step in the bargaining process began in June 1990, where many interests came together to institute the National Peace Accord to bring peace to the communities (Maharaj 2008, 24). It wasn’t until December 1991, when formal negotiations began “with the inauguration of the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA)” (Maharaj 2008, 25). The CODESA I and II negotiations and the following Multi-Party Negotiation Process continued the negotiation process for the new democratic order. However, the political deadlock was prominent because of multi-party agendas. The split with soft liners, reformers, and moderates from the hardliners did not have an aligned goal that caused many of the first negotiations to fail.

However, in early 1993, negotiations resumed and were successful as a pact was agreed upon between the NP and ANC. The pact resulted in a power-sharing agreement for the first five years between the parties regardless of election outcomes, so that the balance of power was more equal and opted for peaceful competition (Miller 2021). The bargaining method helped pave the way for a stable democracy as both sides were part of the process and had influence in the new democracy. The transition came into fruition in the 1994 free elections where the ANC won and Nelson Mandela became the first democratic head of state for South Africa. Thus, through this historical review, it is clear to see that the bargaining method was the main mode for the democratic transition of South Africa with assistance from the above pressures and below violence and demonstrations contributing to a scenario ripe for change.

When looking at the Democratic transition of South Africa, the pressure was placed from below and above, but regime change did not occur until a bargain was made between the ANC and NP. The pressure from below could not bring democracy by itself through the use of violence by the ANC, while the pressure from above recognized that change needed to come to be a participant in the larger global community. Both of these pressures from below and above together helped to create a situation that prepared the two sides to come together for the bargaining process which ultimately succeeded.

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