

After a Decade of Democracy in South Africa— A New Generation of Struggle

By Andre Banks and Devanne Brookins | July 6, 2004

It took U.S. activists decades of campaigning against the apartheid regime in South Africa to arrive at strategies that, when combined with a commitment to transnational relationships, changed more than individual attitudes. This anti-apartheid movement changed the balance of power in the U.S., the future of South Africa, and lives on both sides of the Atlantic. Ten years later, the threat of moving backward is quite real and the stakes are even higher. In place of an apartheid state we now face a Global Apartheid that demands a U.S. movement at its best and most effective.

Apartheid was destined to fail, as it sought to establish itself amidst a growing desire for self-determination in colonial Africa. The 1960s confirmed this destiny as the French and the British began releasing their colonies in West and Southern Africa. The architects of apartheid continued to move against the grain and made political decisions to entrench the system and further divide the country along racial lines, preserving the best resources including access to education, land, and the country's mineral wealth for their own purposes and exploiting the black majority for cheap labor.

The 1960s also marked an important era in the struggle for equality and civil rights in the United States, with the establishment of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 resulting in increased representation in Congress. These events were significant to the anti-apartheid struggle, as African-Americans gained legal and political rights and sought to bring the anti-apartheid struggle to the forefront of their domestic agenda. What followed was one of the most significant and effective mobilization campaigns in history that peaked in the 1980s gaining unprecedented media, political and international attention, and achieving its ultimate goal in the early nineties with the end of apartheid and the first free and fair elections in South Africa.

Perhaps the single most significant factor in the defeat of apartheid was the intermingling of internal resistance and external pressure. International organizations and the grassroots corporate and congression-

al campaigns in the U.S. challenged the private sector through shareholder resolutions and divestment campaigns. They took on the U.S. government, ultimately passing sanctions against the rogue apartheid regime over Reagan's veto, by mobilizing support on Capitol Hill and in Congressional districts across the country. Domestic and international forces joining together proved too much for the Afrikaner elite and forced one of the most poignant transitions to democracy in this century.

But why was the struggle against apartheid so successful in the U.S., which has traditionally pursued a separate and unequal foreign policy relationship with Africa? The answer resides in the ability of Black Americans to mobilize broad-based national campaigns that forced social and political change.

Today our fight is against a system of global apartheid dominated by a white elite minority who dictate access to basic human rights for the global majority based on race, gender and geography. Unfortunately, the heightened level of engagement between Black American and African communities has waned in the last ten years, resulting in less pressure on the U.S. government, corporations, and international institutions to maintain an awareness and commitment to equality and justice for African peoples. The absence of the African-American community in the global struggle for access to education, health, and economic resources is reflected in the lack of credibility and effectiveness of the current movement.



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Just as in apartheid South Africa, the global oppression of many at the hands of a few is inextricably linked with race. Any attempt to affect real change in the current political environment must acknowledge the fact that race has always been, and continues to be today, a major determinant of U.S. domestic and foreign policy. If there is to be real success in dismantling global apartheid, activists in the U.S. must build a social movement that recognizes and prioritizes the centrality of race. And in order to push for real change on these terms it is essential that African struggles be drawn to the center of the discussion.

Nowhere is the impact of global apartheid more clear than on the continent of Africa. Sub-Saharan Africa is the poorest region in the world, and yet in the past two decades it has spent more servicing illegitimate debts to rich countries than it has received in new loans or foreign assistance. With only 10% of the world's population, Africa claims more than 70% of people living with HIV/AIDS, not to mention the lowest life expectancies and highest infant mortality rates in the world. There is no place in the world more affected by the legacy of racism, colonialism and cold war interference. The point here is simple: If the system we challenge has its deadliest consequences in Africa, any movement in the U.S. that seeks to be credible must prioritize solidarity with African struggles.

Bringing Africa and race into the debate were key contributions of the anti-apartheid struggle. Illuminating the supportive role of the U.S. in the racial oppression of South Africans mirrored the struggles of Black Americans in this country. By positioning racial justice as a central motivation in the stand against the global status quo, a new constituency was, and again can be, created that is based on political solidarity. In this movement, Black people must take real leadership in a global struggle that is intimately tied to the success of their own resistance

against multiple forms of oppression. Only by putting Africa where it belongs—at the center—will the full potential of this movement be realized.

The shifting set of U.S.-based individuals and organizations that claim the banner of Global Justice will continue to lack a coherent strategy, broad-based credibility, and as a consequence Black allies, until Africa is drawn away from the margins and into the core of analysis and activism for global justice. The “Seattle Model” that has set the tone in this burgeoning network for the last five years has ignored this central reality, and left us with little more than the familiar trinity: Teach-In, March, and Rally. It is essential that we build a new movement by holding on to those important lessons from the past—creating strategies that fit new political realities and building relationships within a new generation of activists.

The most appropriate way to celebrate this 10th anniversary of the end of South Africa's apartheid is to use the lessons of this historical movement and apply relevant strategies to address modern issues of justice and equality. Black people in the U.S. in particular must make the link between common struggles and insert themselves in global social movements. Prominent leaders as well as grassroots advocates must allow space for a new generation of socially and globally conscious youth to engage in mobilization and movement building.

The generation of activists that were engaged in the fight to end South Africa's apartheid must share their experience and strategies with coming generations. By joining forces—uniting pressure in Africa and the U.S.—we can end global apartheid and move to a new era of human dignity.

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