

June 1961: The Moment of Decision

Immediately after Sharpeville, the PAC called for workers to stay home. Government forces repeatedly barged into workers' homes to force them to report to their jobs. Not surprisingly, more protests followed such tactics. For instance, thirty thousand PAC protesters descended on Cape Town's parliament building in a challenge much more threatening than any previous ANC protests.

On March 28th, Chief Albert Luthuli, the president of the ANC, called for a day of mourning and the start of a stay-at-home campaign. Thousands of ANC supporters also publicly burned their passbooks. The stay-at-home campaign continued for three weeks in the Cape Town area, bringing business and industry virtually to a standstill.

Many of the recently independent governments throughout Africa condemned the South African regime. More surprisingly, the United States and Britain, traditionally two of South Africa's staunchest economic allies, sharply criticized the government's tactics. In the General Assembly of the United Nations, these countries presented strongly worded attacks on the apartheid system. Calls began to mount for the imposition of sanctions against South Africa.

“[We call upon] the government of the Union of South Africa to initiate measures aimed at bringing about racial harmony based on equality in order to ensure that the present situation does not continue or recur, and to abandon its policies of apartheid and racial discrimination.”

—UN Security Council Resolution 134

International investors quickly pulled money out of the South African economy. Many white South Africans followed suit and moved some of their own money into accounts in other countries.

After Sharpeville, Prime Minister Hendrick Verwoerd called a State of Emergency.

This gave police and other government forces additional powers to deal with any signs of unrest. The government banned both the ANC and the PAC, as well as many of their leaders, and members could not communicate with each other legally. Within five weeks, the government detained over eighteen thousand people. The South African government also withdrew from the British Commonwealth, an organization of Great Britain and its former colonies. Many blacks, coloureds, and Asians saw the withdrawal from the moderating influence of the Commonwealth as a major blow to their efforts at peaceful resolution. The government was becoming more conservative, not less.

Over the next year the ANC, the PAC, and other anti-apartheid groups organized more protests from underground. Members met in secret, often disguising themselves in order to travel from place to place. Leaders of the groups sent letters to the government requesting a national convention to resolve the problems of the country. Those requests were ignored and police raids continued.

During another stay-at-home campaign in May 1961, the government mounted a huge military mobilization to try to intimidate African workers from joining the campaign. The government feared that violence similar to anti-colonial protests in Kenya and Algeria would take place in South Africa. White civilians received rifles and handguns to protect themselves in anticipation of violence, despite the clearly pacifist nature of the protest.

Feeling as though the government had rejected all attempts at rational dialogue, the opponents of apartheid began to consider their options. For the following month leaders of the anti-apartheid groups met in secret, usually at night, to discuss how best to approach the future. How should each of the different organizations respond to the current situation? What steps should they now take to eliminate apartheid?

Options in Brief

Option 1: Continue Nonviolent Struggle With Multiracial Support

Nonviolence has been the core principle of our beliefs in the struggle against apartheid. To abandon that principle at this crucial point would be to show the world and our people that we have given up, that we no longer have the courage to stand up for our beliefs. We have seen the positive effects of passive resistance in India, and we can have the same effect here in South Africa. The eventual reconciliation with whites and the establishment of democracy requires that we use only passive means to resist. We must stay the course and remember that it is the stronger man who makes his beliefs known through nonviolent means.

Option 2: Use Limited, Structured Violence With Communist Party Support

Despite repeated attempts to engage the government in talks, we have been turned down. The government will not allow us to fight peacefully any more, and has blocked all our legal acts by making them illegal. It is time to join with the South African Communist Party, which can provide financial backing and which believes that a small group should be the vanguard of the struggle. Structured, organized, limited sabotage of the white government will demonstrate our power, reduce the regime's effectiveness, and show the international community that we are dedicated to preventing deaths. Our people cannot have died in vain while we continue to wait for an opportunity to put more of them in harm's way.

Option 3: Advocate Guerrilla War Tactics For Africans Alone

This is a violent regime that only understands violence. We must speak its language. In our nonviolent struggle we have posed no threat. We have simply offered ourselves up to be shot. But we can instill fear in the whites, and then they will give up their power. We—Africans alone—must eliminate the forces that are standing in the way of our own power. The only way to do that is to take power away from the whites. Let the people speak: give them the weapons to do so. We must show the masses that they can take control. We are ready for a revolution.