

---

# Black South Africans resist pass laws and mount general strike (Sharpeville Massacre), 1960

- [\(mainly or initiated by\) people of color](#) [1]
- [an example of paradox of repression](#) [2]

## Timing

21 March

1960

to:

September

1960

## Location and Goals

Country:

South Africa

Location City/State/Province:

Sharpeville

[View Location on Map](#)

Goals:

Total abolition of pass laws.

## Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 023. Destruction of own property>Burning Passes
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 065. Stay-at-home
- 117. General strike
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 065. Stay-at-home
- 117. General strike
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 065. Stay-at-home

- 117. General strike
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 4th segment:

- 065. Stay-at-home
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 5th segment:

- 065. Stay-at-home
- 117. General strike
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 6th segment:

- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Segment Length:

Approximately 1 month

## Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Black South Africans

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Robert Sobukwe (PAC) and Chief Albert Luthuli.

African National Congress (ANC), Pan Africanist Congress (PAC)

Partners:

African Students Association (ASA), African Students Association (ASA), African Students Union of South Africa (ASUSA), African Students Union of South Africa (ASUSA).

External allies:

Not Known

Involvement of social elites:

Not Known

## **Joining/exiting order of social groups**

Groups in 1st Segment:

- African Students Association
- African Students Union of South Africa

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length:

Approximately 1 month

## **Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence**

Opponents:

The British Government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Some accounts of the Sharpeville Massacre stated that a police officer was shoved, but taking into account the size of the crowd it is difficult to tell whether this was an accident or not.

Repressive Violence:

The police opened fire on the protesters during the first protest. Sixty-nine people were killed and another 180 were wounded in what came to be known as the Sharpeville Massacre.

## **Success Outcome**

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

0 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Total points:

4 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:

Beyond this campaign the PAC and ANC continued to exist, but remained illegal, and most of their leaders were in prison. The pass laws remained until the fall of South African apartheid in 1986.

In 1960 South Africa was under the rule of the National Party, which was imposing harsh, demeaning laws on black South Africans. The party was made up entirely of white people, mostly the descendants of Dutch immigrants. The party was devoted to apartheid and white supremacy, maintained through a collection of policies, including the pass laws.

Pass laws required all black Africans to carry a small booklet containing personal information and a history of employment. If police caught a black African in public without one of these booklets, the police could arrest and fine the individual.

Black Africans had made previous attempts to abolish the pass laws, but none had been successful. [See in this database, “South Africans disobey apartheid laws (Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign,) 1952-1953”].] In 1960 the African National Congress (ANC) decided to launch a campaign to rid South Africa of these laws. Soon afterwards, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) announced that they would also work towards this goal. Their plan was to encourage people to go to police stations without their passes, in order to fill the Sharpeville jail with arrested resisters.

On the morning of 21 March 1960, the PAC leaders gathered near the Sharpeville police station and started walking toward it while singing songs about freedom. The police were waiting for them, and at first did not allow the protesters into the station. Around 11:00 am the police started arresting the demonstrators.

A few hours later 300 police officers and 5,000 protesters had gathered at the scene. Shortly after 1pm the crowd pushed over a police officer, reportedly by accident. One of the younger officers panicked and opened fire on the crowd, and several others followed suit.

After about two minutes, police had killed sixty-nine people and wounded 180 more. This came to be known as the ‘Sharpeville Massacre.’

On 22 March, PAC announced that Robert Sobukwe, the president of the PAC, and 130 other members had been arrested. By 27 March, the police had announced the temporary suspension of pass laws because the jails could not hold any more people.

On 28 March, the ANC began a stay-at-home protest and strike to call attention to the Sharpeville Massacre. To highlight their opposition to the passes, protesters started publicly burning them in bonfires.

On 30 March, the government declared a State of Emergency. Police arrested over 2,000 people. Around noon that day, 30,000 black South Africans marched into Cape Town and demanded to see the Minister of Justice. The Chief of Security promised to grant them an audience and the crowd dispersed, but there was no meeting. The government also banned the ANC and the PAC, but this did little to lower membership. On 2 April, the New York Times estimated that 70,000 people were involved in these organizations.

On 6 April, the police once again started enforcing the pass laws. On 4 May, a court sentenced Robert Sobukwe to three years in prison for his involvement in the protests. By 6 May, the total number of people arrested because of the protest had grown to 18,000. Others involved in the strike, which started on 28 March, had returned to work.

The State of Emergency was lifted on 31 August, but 10,500 people remained in jails. The campaign of resistance to the pass laws ended in September.

On 5 October, fifty-two percent of white South Africans voted in favour of an Independent Republic that would no longer be a part of the British Commonwealth; this did not change apartheid laws in any way. Shortly after this, the United Nations General Assembly began to pressure the new government to put an end to apartheid.

Over time, apartheid repression became even worse. The PAC and ANC continued to exist, but remained illegal, and most of their leaders were in prison. Further campaigns were launched, implicitly or explicitly

against apartheid. [See in this database: "Durban, South Africa, workers mass strike for a raise in wages, 1973," and "South African blacks boycott apartheid in Port Elizabeth, 1985-86."]

South African apartheid fell in 1986.

## Research Notes

Sources:

"Sharpeville Massacre: 21 March 1960." South African History Online. Published March 2011. Accessed 29 April 2013. <<http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/sharpeville-massacre-21-march-1960>>

"21 March 1960: Scores die in Sharpeville Shoot-out." On This Day. BBC Online. Accessed 19 April 2013. <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/march/21/newsid\\_2653000/2653405.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/march/21/newsid_2653000/2653405.stm)>

Wiley, David and Kornbluh, Mark Lawrence, Program Directores. "South Africa: Overcoming Apartheid." Michigan State University. Accessed 29 April 2013. <<http://overcomingapartheid.msu.edu/multimedia.php?id=3>>

"Pass Laws in South Africa" South African History Online. Published July 2009. Accessed 19 April 2013. <<http://www.sahistory.org.za/south-africa-1806-1899/pass-laws-south-africa-1800-1994>>

Additional Notes:

In response to the Sharpeville Massacre the ANC also developed a wing devoted to violent resistance called "Spear of the Nation" in English. However, because their first action did not occur until after this campaign they do not appear in this narrative.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Hayley Summers, 29/04/2013

[Back to top](#)

**A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.**

Copyright Swarthmore College.

[Creative Commons License](#)

Global Nonviolent Action Database is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#).

Original website design and artwork created by [Daniel Hunter](#).

Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at <http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu>.

Registered users can [login](#) to the website.

---

**Source URL (retrieved on 09/20/2020 - 05:20):** <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/black-south-africans-resist-pass-laws-and-mount-general-strike-sharpeville-massacre-1960>

**Links:**

[1] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-people-color>

[2] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pes-tags/example-paradox-repression>