When Africa Broke Free

Many of the continent’s successes and struggles today can be traced to one momentous year, when 17 African nations gained independence from European colonial rule. By Michael Wines

British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan took the podium in Cape Town, in February 1960, to address South Africa’s parliament. He knew how unstoppable Africans’ longing for freedom was.

Macmillan had spent the previous month trekking through Africa to talk to leaders about the future of the continent. Now he was sending a message to the world. The days of Britain’s empire—and those of France, Belgium, and other European nations—were numbered.

“The wind of change is blowing through this continent,” he said. “This growth of national consciousness is a political fact.”

It turned out to be not a wind but a hurricane. Most of Africa had been kept under European rule for nearly a century. In 1950, only four nations in Africa were independent. But by the end of 1960, 27 were. In that single year, 17 nations suddenly gained control of their destinies. They represented 198 million Africans, or 70 percent of the continent. It was a time of wild celebration and endless hope.

“My major life’s work is done,” said Nnamdi Azikiwe, an American-educated journalist and politician who became Nigeria’s first president, as his nation gained independence that October. “My country is now free.”

But many of the hopes of leaders like Azikiwe—for stable, prosperous societies,
honest governments, and peace—proved hard to find in the decades that followed. The social and political structures that European colonizers left behind made it difficult for newly independent nations to succeed. African nations struggled to develop because of stunted economies limited to raw-material and crop exports; roads that led only to mines and farms, not to villages; and governments designed to keep the state secure rather than improve people’s lives.

“All of those were built to serve colonial interests, not the interests of African citizens,” says Jennifer G. Cooke, who heads the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C. “So many of today’s problems were embedded and created during the colonial era.”

‘Scramble for Africa’

European involvement in Africa began in the mid-15th century. During that period, Portuguese traders arrived on the continent looking for gold. By the end of the 16th century, Europeans were trading African slaves, sending many of them to America. But colonization on a large scale didn’t occur until much later. In the late 1800s, when explorers uncovered the continent’s riches, including diamonds, rubber, and iron ore, the “scramble for Africa” began. In 1884, European powers gathered for a conference in Berlin to carve up the continent. Britain, Germany, and Portugal gained control over most of southern and eastern Africa. France received the west and north, and Belgium got the Congo. By 1900, 90 percent of Africa was under European control (see map).

Colonial rule brought some benefits, like roads, railroads, and educational and governmental models that still survive. But it was riddled with abuses. Africans hired to oversee the colonies often ruled cruelly. Direct European control could be even worse. Congo’s first ruler, Belgium’s King Leopold II, boosted production at rubber plantations and mines by ordering managers to hack off the hands of slow workers.

In addition, Europeans often created
territorial borders arbitrarily and without consideration of tribal relationships. This led to a good deal of the ethnic tensions and fighting Africa still faces today.

**Fights for Independence**

After World War II, a bankrupt Europe faced demands for freedom from its colonial subjects across the globe, including those in Africa. In some cases, independence movements turned violent, as guerrilla fighters attacked colonial governments. In others, African leaders rallied support for self-determination with relatively little bloodshed.

For Nigeria, freedom came gradually. In 1946, Britain gave in to Nigerians’ demands for representation in the colonial government. Eight years later, Nigerian regional assemblies were granted more power, which led ultimately to the end of colonial rule. In 1960, Britain granted independence to Somalia as well. Within the next five years, eight more British colonies—including Uganda, Zambia, and Tanzania—also became free.

An exhausted France, which had become tied up in a guerrilla war in Algeria in the mid-’50s and had killed 10,000 Africans in a 1955 revolt in Cameroon, gave up most of its empire. In fact, 14 of the 17 nations set free in 1960 were French colonies, including Mali, Niger, and Madagascar.

These changes in Africa played out at the height of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. The U.S. was intent on preventing the spread of Communism around the globe, and Africa became one of many battlegrounds.

Because of the continent’s history, many African leaders were suspicious of the democratic West but open-minded about Communism. “We in Africa have had experience of French colonialism, of British colonialism, of Belgian and Portuguese,” one intellectual from Guinea told *The New York Times* in 1960. “We can worry about Russia later. First we must rid this continent of the colonialism that still exists here.”

In Congo, freed that year, Belgian forces fled in the face of rioting. The country soon fell into a civil war. During this period of conflict, Colonel Joseph Mobutu, the army’s chief of staff, seized control. It was revealed many years later that the U.S., afraid that Congo would become Communist, had secretly aided the anti-Soviet Mobutu. He became one of Africa’s most savage dictators.

Indeed, for many former colonies, freedom’s blessings have been compromised by bloodshed and suffering. South Africa gained its independence from Great Britain in 1910. Yet white minority rule and apartheid—a brutal system of discrimination against the black majority—
lasted until 1991. Three years later, Nelson Mandela became South Africa’s first black president. (Mandela died in 2013.)

Zimbabwe, formerly Rhodesia, declared independence from Britain in 1965. But a white minority ruled over the majority black population until 1980. Zimbabwe was once one of Africa’s top agricultural nations. Now, it has become one of the continent’s hungriest under its autocratic ruler, Robert Mugabe.

Sudan, freed by Britain in 1956, has been wracked by decades of civil war that’s killed 2 million people. Rwanda gained independence from Belgium in 1962. But the nation was shattered in 1994 by a politically driven genocide that killed 800,000 people in just 100 days (see “From Rwanda to Harvard,” p. 12).

More recently, Islamic extremism has become a problem in countries like Nigeria, Kenya, and Somalia. In this region, terrorist groups like Boko Haram and Al Shabab are creating instability and posing a growing threat to the U.S. and the West.

Many African states are still struggling to overcome their colonial legacies. But lately, more nations seem ready for economic and social transformation.

Africa Rising

Continent-wide, Africa’s economy is growing twice as fast as the worldwide average. Nations like Côte d’Ivoire (Ivory Coast), Rwanda, Ghana, and Ethiopia are among the fastest-growing economies anywhere. The continent is embracing technological advances at a staggering pace. Today, 1 in 5 Africans use the Internet, compared to 1 in 40 a decade ago. In addition, 7 in 10 have a cellphone subscription. Nairobi, Kenya’s capital, has been dubbed the “Silicon Savannah” for its innovative apps, from health care to banking.

Economists predict that 100 million Africans will join the middle class in the next five years. In 2012, when the World Bank ranked nations in order of their success in creating better conditions for investment, 5 of the top 10 were in Africa. Most important, perhaps, corrupt and disorganized governments are slowly giving way to smarter and more honest leadership. Ghana has become a model of a developing democracy after years of autocratic rule; Nigeria, once legendary for corruption, is slowly remaking its capital, Lagos, into a stable, livable city. Investments in education in Ghana, Kenya, and Nigeria have led to a new, more educated young generation.

Kweku Mandela, a grandson of Nelson Mandela, believes that Africa’s youth is driving many of the positive changes on the continent. He co-founded the organization Africa Rising to help carry on his grandfather’s legacy and promote a positive image of Africa.

When people think of Africa, they “tend to focus on things like famine, civil war, poverty, and disease,” he says. But “a lot of young Africans with access to information and better education [are] starting to transform the continent.”

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