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Apartheid was a system of racial segregation in South Africa enforced through legislation by the National Party (NP) governments, the ruling party from 1948 to 1994, under which the rights of the majority black inhabitants were curtailed and Afrikaner minority rule was maintained. Apartheid was developed after World War II by the Afrikaner-dominated National Party and Broederbond organisations and was practised also in South West Africa, which was administered by South Africa under a League of Nations mandate (revoked in 1966 via United Nations Resolution 2145), until it gained independence as Namibia in 1999. By extension, the term is nowadays currently used for every kind of segregation, established by the state authority in a country, against the social and civil rights of a minority of citizens, due to ethnic prejudices.

Racial segregation in South Africa began in colonial times under Dutch rule. Apartheid as an official policy was introduced following the general election of 1948. Legislation classified inhabitants into four racial groups, "black", "white", "coloured", and "Indian", with Indian and coloured divided into several sub-classifications. Residential areas were segregated. From 1960–1983, 3.5 million non-white South Africans were removed in one of the largest mass removals in modern history. Non-white political representation was abolished in 1970, and starting in that year black people were deprived of their citizenship, legally becoming citizens of one of ten tribally based self-governing homelands called bantustans, four of which became nominally independent states. The government segregated education, medical care, beaches, and other public services, and provided black people with services inferior to those of white people.

Apartheid sparked significant internal resistance and violence, and a long arms and trade embargo against South Africa. Since the 1950s, a series of popular uprisings and protests was met with the banning of opposition and imprisoning of anti-apartheid leaders. As unrest spread and became more effective and militarised, state organisations responded with repression and violence. Along with the sanctions placed on South Africa by the international community, this made it increasingly difficult for the government to maintain the regime.

Apartheid reforms in the 1980s failed to quell the mounting opposition, and in 1990 President Frederik Willem de Klerk began negotiations to end apartheid, culminating in multi-racial democratic elections in 1994, won by the African National Congress under Nelson Mandela. The vestiges of apartheid still shape South African politics and society. Although the official abolishing of apartheid occurred in 1990 with repeal of the last of the remaining apartheid laws, the end of apartheid is widely regarded as arising from the 1994 democratic general elections.