

The emancipation of sub-Saharan Africa

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The decolonisation of English-speaking Africa

The decolonisation of sub-Saharan Africa was a gradual process. The British colonies were the first to gain independence.

On 19 December 1955, the Sudanese Parliament proclaimed the country's independence. Two weeks later, on 1 January 1956, Sudan became officially independent.

On 6 March 1957, leader Kwame Nkrumah achieved independence for the Gold Coast, which was renamed Ghana.

Nigeria became independent on 1 October 1960, Sierra Leone on 27 April 1961, Tanganyika on 28 December 1961 and Uganda on 9 December 1962. On 29 September 1964, Tanganyika joined with Zanzibar to form Tanzania.

Decolonisation proved more difficult in Kenya, where the Mau Mau Uprising began in 1952. This militant movement was opposed to British colonial law. Nationalist leader Jomo Kenyatta, accused of being a member of the Mau Mau movement, was arrested by the British authorities. He became a symbol of national unity, and was released in 1961. Kenya was finally granted independence in September 1963, and Jomo Kenyatta became the first president of the new republic.

In southern Africa, Nyasaland proclaimed its independence and took the name Malawi (6 July 1964), and Northern Rhodesia became independent as Zambia (24 October 1964). In 1965, the white minority in power in Southern Rhodesia unilaterally proclaimed independence and established an apartheid regime. The white colonists remained in power until 1979, and in 1980, the British granted independence to Southern Rhodesia, which became Zimbabwe. Robert Mugabe was appointed Prime Minister.

The decolonisation of French sub-Saharan Africa

Change was also afoot in the French colonies in sub-Saharan Africa. In 1946, the constitution of the Fourth Republic granted these territories a measure of autonomy and the right to elect representatives in the French assemblies. Félix Houphouët-Boigny from Côte d'Ivoire and Léopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal even became ministers in Paris. The Defferre framework law (*loi-cadre*) gave a considerable degree of internal autonomy to France's African territories. In 1958, General de Gaulle allowed them to choose between secession leading to independence, and membership of the French Community under the presidency of de Gaulle. With the exception of Guinea, all the colonies in French sub-Saharan Africa opted for the second solution. This gave them a large measure of internal autonomy, with only national defence and foreign policy remaining under the control of the French Government. Gradually, all these colonies asked France to transfer these responsibilities. Several new independent states were therefore born in 1960: Cameroon, Congo (also referred to as Congo-Brazzaville), Côte d'Ivoire, Dahomey, Gabon, Upper Volta, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Central African Republic, Senegal, Chad and Togo.

The independence of the Belgian Congo

With its gold, copper and uranium resources, the Belgian Congo was the richest of all the European colonies in sub-Saharan Africa, and this vast territory was coveted by major companies. The Belgian Government had long pursued a paternalistic policy in the Congo, refusing to allow any developments. In 1960, riots broke out and Belgium abruptly granted independence to the Congo on 30 June 1960. But no sooner had it gained its independence than the country became the scene of massacres, mainly targeting Europeans, and fell into the grip of a civil war. The progressive, centralising Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba soon stated his opposition to the federalist Joseph Kasa-Vubu, who had been appointed President of the Republic. And the rich province of Katanga, led by Moïse Tschombé, soon declared its secession and independence from the rest of the country. These divisions rapidly degenerated into bloody battles, and the Congolese conflict took on an international dimension with the intervention of UN peacekeepers. In 1961, the situation worsened still further when Patrice Lumumba was arrested and assassinated. The conflict was finally brought to an end in 1965, with the coup d'état orchestrated by General Mobutu, head of the Congolese army.

On 1 July 1962, two other territories under Belgian authority, Rwanda and Urundi (which became Burundi) gained sovereignty.

The independence of the Portuguese colonies

Portugal was the first European country to establish colonies in Africa, but it was also the last to leave the continent. In 1961, riots broke out in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau, but Portugal refused to yield and brutally crushed these movements. The uprisings gradually became more widespread and were organised around nationalist movements calling for independence. But it was not until the 'Carnation Revolution' and the fall of the Salazar dictatorship in Portugal in 1974–1975 that Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde gained their independence. The relinquishment of Portugal's African colonies signalled the end of its colonial empire. Its only remaining territory was the trading post of Macao, which was returned to Chinese sovereignty in 1999.