

The question of worldwide decolonisation

When the United Nations was founded in 1945, 750 million people, nearly a third of the world's population, lived in Territories that were dependent on colonial Powers. Today, fewer than 2 million people live under colonial rule in the 17 remaining non-self-governing territories. A special committee of decolonisation was established in 1962, currently working to facilitate the advance of these 17 territories towards complete self-determination.

Definitions of key terms

Colony - a country or area under the full or partial political control of another country and occupied by settlers from that country

Imperialism - a policy of extending a country's power and influence through colonization, use of military force, or other means

Decolonisation - the action or process of a state withdrawing from a former colony, leaving it independent

Self-determination - the process by which a country determines its own statehood and forms its own government

Anticolonialism - a term used to describe the various resistance movements directed against colonial and imperial powers

Postcolonialism - the lasting impacts of colonialism on the political or cultural condition of a former colony

Sustainable Development Goals - a plan to enhance peace and prosperity, eradicate poverty and protect the planet, recognised globally as essential to the future sustainability of the world

Contextual information

Modern global colonialism began in the 15th century with the "Age of Discovery", which was led by the Portuguese, and then the Spanish exploration of the Americas, the coasts of Africa, the Middle East, India and East Asia. During the late 16th and 17th centuries, England, France and the Dutch Republic established their own overseas empires, in competition with each other.

The era of New Imperialism led to rapid colonisation, especially in Africa where Germany, Belgium and Italy were also competing. However, the first era of decolonisation was at the end of the 18th and early 19th century. Great Britain's Thirteen North American colonies were the first to break from the British Empire in 1776, and were recognized as an independent nation by France in 1778 and Britain in 1783.

After World War I, the colonial map was redrawn after the German Empire and the Ottoman Empire were defeated as the colonies were transferred to the League of Nations, which redistributed it to the victorious powers. Japanese imperialism after this time was particularly brutal, especially in Korea and China. Cases of decolonisation within the British Empire are also noted for involving significant violence.

The second phase of decolonisation began after World War II when anticolonialist movements began to gain momentum and were fully mobilised. There was growing unrest in the colonial system and many countries acquired their independence. Winston Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1941 Atlantic Charter declared that they would "respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live".

The Non-Aligned Movement is an international organisation formed in 1961 who do not want to be officially aligned with or against any major power bloc. The *Havana Declaration of 1979* said that the organisation was to help countries keep their "the national independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and security of non-aligned countries" in their "struggle against imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism, and all forms of foreign aggression, occupation, domination, interference or hegemony, as well as against great power and bloc politics." In 1945, there were 35 member states in the United Nations but as the newly independent nations of the "third world" joined, by 1970, membership was 127.

In order to deal with the problem of postcolonialism due to a common history and culture, former colonial powers created institutions which more loosely associated their former colonies, including the Commonwealth of Nations and the French Union. The organisations serve cultural, economic, and political purposes between the associated countries. None of these organisations have become politically prominent as an entity in its own right.

One of the main conflicts today in the topic of decolonisation is Western Sahara which was previously a Spanish colony and is now a disputed territory in the Maghreb region of North Africa, which is partially controlled by the self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and partially Moroccan-occupied. After 16-year-long insurgency, there was a UN-brokered truce in 1991 and a promise of a referendum on independence which has not taken place. A buffer strip with landmines and fortifications separates the western area controlled by Morocco from the eastern area controlled by the Polisario Front. The Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), declared by the Polisario Front in 1976, is recognised by many governments and is a full member of the African Union.

The other remaining non-self-governing territories which have yet to be decolonised are Anguilla, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Falkland Islands,

Montserrat, Saint Helena, Turks and Caicos Islands, US Virgin Islands, Gibraltar, American Samoa, French Polynesia, Guam, New Caledonia, Pitcairn and Tokelau. A problem faced by the UN is ensuring all non-self-governing territories are able to address a range of challenges as a critical key to advancing decolonization efforts. It is recognised that the Sustainable Development Goals cannot be realized if economic dependency continues.

Major countries and organisations involved

Western Sahara and other non-self-governing territories

The Special Committee on Decolonization

The Non-Aligned Movement

The Saharan Arab Democratic Republic

Polisario Front

Timeline of events

Decolonization in Asia

1931 - Gandhi leads Salt March

1935 - Government of India Act

1942 - Quit India movements begins

1947 - India and Pakistan are independent of Great Britain

Decolonization in Africa

1948 - First apartheid legislation in South Africa

1957 - Ghana is first independent African nation

1960 - Congo is granted independence from Belgium

1962 - Algeria gains independence from France

1963 - Organization for African Unity is formed

Decolonization in the Middle East

1917 - Balfour Declaration

1922 - Britain receives League of Nations mandate for Palestine

1936-1939 - Arab uprisings in Palestine

1948 - Partition of Palestine and First Arab-Israeli War

1952 - King Farouk is overthrown in Egypt

1956 - Egypt nationalises the Suez Canal

1958 - United Arab Republic is formed

1964 - The Palestine Liberation Organization is formed

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1944-1979

Western Sahara Timeline

1884 - Spain colonises Western Sahara, an area formerly populated by Berber tribes.

1934 - Becomes a Spanish province known as Spanish Sahara.

1957 - Newly-independent Morocco lays centuries-old claim to Western Sahara.

1965 - The UN calls for the decolonisation of Western Sahara.

1973 - Polisario Front, the indigenous Saharawi independence movement, is founded.

1975 - Morocco's King Hassan defies a Hague ruling in favour of Saharawi rights to self-determination and stages the "Green March" of 350,000 Moroccans into Western Sahara. Spain withdraws.

1975-91 - Polisario Front fights a 16-year-long guerrilla war against Moroccan forces, which ends with a UN-brokered cease-fire.

1975-76 - Morocco annexes two-thirds of Western Sahara after colonial power Spain withdraws. Polisario guerrillas declare the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), with a government-in-exile in Algeria. Thousands of Sahrawi refugees flee to western Algeria to set up camps near the town of Tindouf.

1979 - Mauritania withdraws, leaving Morocco to annex its share of the territory.

1991-2000s - UN brokered ceasefire ends war but Morocco has yet to hold an agreed referendum on independence. Numerous UN-sponsored talks have failed to yield a breakthrough.

2016 - Long-term leader Mohamed Abdelaziz Ezzedine dies.

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

1960 - Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples adopted by the General Assembly as the process of decolonization continued to advance. It affirmed the right of all people to self-determination and proclaimed that colonialism should be brought to a speedy and unconditional end.

1962 - A Special Committee on Decolonization was established to monitor the implementation of the committee.

1990 - International Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism proclaimed by the Assemble which included a specific plan of action. Followed by the Second International Decade in 2001 and the the Third International Decade from 2011-2020.

1945 - The UN Charter included a statement for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples.

Possible solutions

Decolonization is still incomplete and cannot be advanced until non-self-governing territories address a range of economic, social and environmental challenges.

Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals is important for Territories which face the problems of climate change, access to health care, economic diversification, marine resource conservation and scarcity of drinking water. Achieving these goals will increase possibilities for further advancement of self-government. Increased communication between the UN Special Committee and administering Powers can also help to achieve these goals. Countries with full sovereignty can receive aid and take decisions on economic development policies more quickly than non-self-governing territories who have to wait extended periods of time for a response to crises. This problem can be eradicated by bring an end to economic dependency on other nations.

The UN envoy for Western Sahara has said he believes a peaceful solution to the conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front is possible. Talks attended by the foreign ministers of Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania, and representatives from the Western Saharan Polisario secessionist movement took place for the first time since 2012 and are set to continue in the first quarter of 2019. However, some believe that

this is not enough to resolve the conflict. Morocco intend for self-determination to come about by negotiation and not by a referendum, which is the desire of the SADR. It is thought that the most democratic solution would be allowing people to choose options in a referendum but it isn't clear who would partake in any future referendum as the Moroccan government has convinced many of its citizens to relocate to the territory through subsidies and tax exemptions.

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