

## **Explaining Political Development in Post-liberation Southern Africa**

Salih O. Noor

University of Chicago

Southern Africa has a distinct history of prolonged settler-colonial domination and violent anticolonial revolutions, often referred to as “Southern Africa’s Revolution” or the “War of Independence.” In the early 1960s, resistance by settler-colonial or White-minority regimes to decolonization and black majority rule in Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe provoked violent, ideologically driven liberation struggles that defined the second half of the twentieth century. These processes were dominated by “revolutionary” national liberation movements (NLMs) led by radical political leaders who aimed to dismantle the racialized state and social structures of settler-colonial rule and radically build more equitable, inclusive, and non-racist national communities. By the mid-1970s to early 1990s, the revolutionary NLMs eventually gained political power with the end of settler-colonial domination in all five countries and have since dominated the national political arena.

The liberation struggles and their legacies continue to animate academic and public debates focusing on the failures of the former liberation parties to achieve lasting transformation and democracy in the region. However, less attention has been paid to the patterns of postcolonial political development and their structural outcomes that markedly vary among the countries. The enduring political and social legacies of liberation observed in today’s Southern Africa are defined by three distinct political regimes, each marked by varying patterns of political inclusion, as well as social structures with markedly different forms of social inequalities and conflict. These include less inclusive semi-democracies with moderately unequal, post-racial societies (i.e., Angola and Mozambique), a militarized semi-authoritarianism characterized by the least inequality but extreme polarization (Zimbabwe), and inclusive multiracial democracies with highly unequal societies polarized by racial and post-racial class divisions (i.e., South Africa and Namibia).

The sharply contrasting legacies of Southern Africa’s historic struggles are puzzling, considering the countries’ similar backgrounds—including settler colonialism, geopolitical position, sociocultural orientation—and political domination since settler-colonial domination by political actors with shared revolutionary ideologies and agendas. Dominant approaches focus on

deterministic structural variables of the settler-colonial period, political factors related to nationalist conflicts, or more recent events unique to each country. Moreover, case studies and generalizations from well-known cases dominate the literature, with no comparative analysis of all five countries. This study considers all five countries and focuses on a foundational period—defined as “the liberation reform episode”—to explain the differing legacies of liberation in contemporary Southern Africa. I conceptualize the liberation reform episode as a critical juncture during which radical liberation elites assumed political power and pursued different reform approaches. I show that Southern Africa liberation elites adopted a ‘radical’ reform option (Mozambique and Angola) or ‘liberal’ reform option (South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe) due to variations in the mode and timing of national liberation. This provided liberation leaders with distinctive sets of opportunities and constraints that led to three reform approaches—radical (Mozambique and Angola), liberal (South Africa and Namibia), and stalled liberal (Zimbabwe)—that defined the critical juncture of liberation reforms in southern Africa.

The varying reform approaches help explain differing trajectories of political and sociological development in post-settler colonial Southern Africa. In all countries, the reform choices triggered a reactive sequence—a political dynamic of predictable reactions and counterreactions—that dominated the aftermath of the liberation episode. Radical reforms (Mozambique and Angola) provoked a violent conservative backlash by marginalized counterrevolutionary actors, which in turn led to government counterresponses with political and socioeconomic liberalization. In dramatic contrast, liberal reforms (South Africa and Namibia) generated a non-violent social-democratic backlash by popular sectors against enduring racial inequalities, rising and class inequalities, and persistent poverty, to which governments responded with renewed efforts at greater redistribution, employment creation, poverty reduction, and welfare for the urban and rural poor. Finally, stalled liberal reforms (Zimbabwe) activated a broader liberal backlash from the popular sector and diverse pro-democracy forces, which in turn led the government to counterreact with renewed repression, partial inclusion, and radical redistribution of white-owned land. In all countries, the counter-responses by governments defused the backlashes, leading to the reproduction of state-regime institutions and social-conflict structures that defined the critical juncture. These more stable structures or final outcomes, which have consolidated in Mozambique, Angola, and Zimbabwe in the past two

decades or crystalized in South Africa and Namibia over the past decade, represent the more lasting legacies of liberation in Southern Africa.

This study provides the first comprehensive explanation of Southern Africa's liberation struggles and their legacies through a comparative-historical analysis of all five countries. It adopts a critical junctures framework of analysis that emphasizes the causal significance of critical junctures understood as well-defined episodes during which actors adopt key choices that prove momentous for subsequent processes and outcomes. The study offers a path-dependent explanation that traces the contemporary legacies of Southern African liberation struggles to the foundational period of national freedom. The argument contrasts with alternative explanations that constantly reach back to the distant past in search of historical causes or stress relatively recent political events specific to each country. The analytical approach integrates structure and agency as important causal factors, in contrast to conventional approaches to political change in Southern Africa typically emphasizing either the antecedent conditions of the settler-colonial era or voluntaristic actors linked to the liberation struggles. Lastly, this study's emphasis on the liberation episode is different from other scholars emphasizing other periods (such as the colonial period, the liberation struggles, or key events in recent decades) as alternative critical junctures.