

Decolonization: Meaning and Evolution

Decolonization, process by which colonies become independent of the colonizing country. Decolonization was gradual and peaceful for some British colonies largely settled by expatriates but violent for others, where native rebellions were energized by nationalism. After World War II, European countries generally lacked the wealth and political support necessary to suppress faraway revolts; they also faced opposition from the new superpowers, the U.S. and the Soviet Union, both of which had taken positions against colonialism. Korea was freed in 1945 by Japan's defeat in the war. The U.S. relinquished the Philippines in 1946. Britain left India in 1947, Palestine in 1948, and Egypt in 1956; it withdrew from Africa in the 1950s and '60s, from various island protectorates in the 1970s and '80s, and from Hong Kong in 1997. The French left Vietnam in 1954 and gave up its North African colonies by 1962. Portugal gave up its African colonies in the 1970s; Macau was returned to the Chinese in 1999.

Emergence of Decolonisation and the Aftermath

The Second World War dealt a serious blow to the colonial powers, depriving them of their former prestige. The Netherlands, Belgium and France were defeated and occupied. The United Kingdom was seriously depleted. The peoples under colonial rule, often employed to fill the ranks of allied armies in war time, were determined to break the ties that still held them to Europe, now ruined and stripped of its resources.

Furthermore the emergence of two anti-colonialist superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, and the new international climate after 1945 encouraged the colonies to make a bid for independence. The Charter of the United Nations affirmed its '*respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples*'. The American President, Franklin Roosevelt, and the British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, had already subscribed to this principle in the Atlantic Charter, which they signed on 14 August 1941 on the American cruiser Augusta, off Newfoundland. In item 3 of this declaration the two Heads of State made the following undertaking: '*They respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live; and they*

wish to see sovereign rights and self government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them.'

Decolonisation unfolded in two phases. The first lasted from 1945 to 1955, mainly affecting countries in the Near and Middle East, and South-East Asia. The second phase started in 1955 and mainly concerned North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa.

The colonised peoples of South-East Asia were the first to demand the departure of the Europeans and to claim independence. In February 1947 the British decided to leave India. Several months later it gained its independence, but not without suffering violent clashes between the Hindu and Muslim communities. On 15 August 1947 this situation led to the partition of the subcontinent into two separate states: India and Pakistan. In 1948 the United Kingdom also granted independence to Burma and Ceylon, but Malaya had to wait till 1957 to gain the same status.

Meanwhile Indonesia endured four years of military and diplomatic confrontation with the Netherlands, until the Dutch government recognised the independence of the Dutch East Indies in December 1949.

France also had to cope with demands for independence from its colonies. In 1946 it became embroiled in a colonial war in Indochina, waged far from home and to prove costly in human life. Eight years later the conflict ended with the victory of the Viet Minh (League for Independence of Vietnam) over the French forces. The Geneva Accords of 21 July 1954 ended the fighting, obliging France to leave the country. Vietnam was divided into two halves: north of the 17th parallel, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam; and to the south, Vietnam. After proclaiming their independence in 1953, Laos and Cambodia gained full recognition.

Another wave of decolonisation swept through the Near and Middle East (Lebanon, Syria) and North Africa (Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco). The French protectorates in Morocco and Tunisia obtained their independence in 1956 through negotiation, but the situation in Algeria was very different. In 1945 the French army violently repressed the frequent demonstrations of nationalist feeling, fuelled by demands for independence. The authorities treated Algeria as an integral part of French territory and it was only after eight years of savage warfare — lasting from the 1954 uprising to the signing of the Evian Accords in March 1962 — that the country finally achieved independence.

The newly independent countries of Asia and Africa refused to align themselves with the two superpowers. The Bandung Conference, in Indonesia, held from 17 to 24 April 1955, brought together some 29 delegates from African and Asian countries. They affirmed their determination to remain independent and non-aligned with respect to either the United States or the Soviet Union. They opposed colonialism and encouraged peoples still under colonial rule to fight for their freedom.

On 6 March 1957 Ghana, a former British colony, became the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to proclaim its independence. Events followed a similar pattern in nearby French colonies and in 1960 some 15 new independent states emerged: Guinea (1958), Cameroon, Congo-Brazzaville, Ivory Coast, Dahomey, Gabon, Upper Volta, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Central African Republic, Senegal, Chad and Togo. On 30 June 1960 Congo also proclaimed itself independent. The former Belgian colony of Central Africa became the Democratic Republic of Congo.

In Egypt President Gamal Abdel Nasser, the leader of the pan-Arab movement, nationalised the Suez Canal Company on 26 July 1956. This direct attack on the interests of France, Britain and Israel triggered the Suez crisis. In October 1956 the stand-off culminated in joint military intervention by the three countries against the former British protectorate. Despite Nasser's military defeat France and Britain were forced to evacuate their expeditionary force, yielding to growing pressure from the United States and the Soviet Union. An international peacekeeping force under the aegis of the United Nations took their place. The Suez crisis ended in a diplomatic fiasco and moral defeat for the two former colonial powers — France and the United Kingdom — whilst Colonel Nasser emerged as the champion of the Arab cause and decolonisation.

In the ten years following the end of the Second World War, with successive waves of decolonisation in Asia and Africa, the Third World took its place as a new player in the international arena.