Paths to Independence

AiCE Africanism & Pan-African Studies — The Year of Africa and the routes to freedom

The Year of Africa: 1960

The year 1960 stands alone in the history of African decolonisation. In a single twelve-month period, seventeen African nations achieved formal independence from European colonial rule. The sheer speed of the transformation was breathtaking — a continental tidal wave that swept away colonial structures that had taken decades to build.

Country	Event & Significance
Cameroon (Jan 1960)	Independence from France — first of the 1960 wave.
Senegal & Mali Federation (Apr 1960)	French Sudan and Senegal form the Mali Federation, later split into separate states.
Congo, DRC (Jun 1960)	Independence from Belgium — Lumumba becomes PM; crisis follows immediately.
Somalia (Jun 1960)	British and Italian Somaliland unite as independent Somalia.
Benin, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, Central African Republic, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon (Jul-Aug 1960)	A cluster of French territories all achieve independence within weeks of each other.
Senegal & Mali (Aug-Sep 1960)	Independence from France after the dissolution of the Mali Federation.
Nigeria (Oct 1960)	Independence from Britain — Africa's most populous nation becomes free.
Mauritania & Madagascar (Nov 1960)	Independence from France.
Guinea-Bissau (Dec 1960)	Armed struggle against Portugal begins under Cabral's PAIGC — a different, longer path.

Negotiated Independence vs. Armed Struggle

The paths to African independence were not uniform. They ranged from remarkably smooth negotiated transfers of power to brutal, decades-long armed struggles. The path taken in each territory was shaped by the nature of the colonial power, the presence or absence of a significant settler population, the economic stakes involved, and the character and strategy of the independence movement.

The British territories of West Africa — Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Gambia — achieved independence through negotiated processes, in which British-educated African political leaders built mass political parties, won elections under colonial constitutions, and gradually assumed more and more governmental authority until full independence was granted. This process was made possible by the fact that these were not significant settler colonies: there was no large European population with a vested interest in preventing African majority rule.

The situation was radically different in territories with large settler populations — Kenya, Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), and South Africa — where European settlers had seized the best land and built economic and political systems designed to maintain white minority privilege permanently. In these territories, the transfer of political power required not merely negotiation with a colonial government in a distant capital, but the dismantling of an entire settler society's system of privilege. The result, in each case, was prolonged and violent conflict.

The Portuguese territories — Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau — had a unique situation: Portugal, under the Salazar and Caetano dictatorships, simply refused to decolonise, maintaining that its African territories were not colonies but 'overseas provinces.' The result was decades of armed struggle by independence movements — the MPLA in Angola, FRELIMO in Mozambique, the PAIGC in Guinea-Bissau — that only ended when the Portuguese military, exhausted by colonial wars it could not win, overthrew the Caetano government in the Carnation Revolution of April 1974.

Zimbabwe and the Last Liberation Struggle

The struggle for Zimbabwe's independence — led by Robert Mugabe's ZANU and Joshua Nkomo's ZAPU — was one of the most protracted and complex liberation struggles in African history. Southern Rhodesia had declared Unilateral Independence from Britain in 1965 under the white settler leader Ian Smith, an act of rebellion against Britain's insistence that majority rule must precede independence. The Smith government maintained white minority rule for fifteen years, supported by apartheid South Africa.

The armed struggle waged by ZANLA and ZIPRA from bases in Mozambique and Zambia gradually made the country ungovernable. The Lancaster House Agreement of 1979, brokered by Britain, led to elections in 1980 that brought Mugabe's ZANU-PF to power. Zimbabwe achieved independence on 18 April 1980 — the last major African independence achieved through armed struggle.

Key Takeaways

Seventeen nations achieved independence in the single 'Year of Africa,' 1960 alone, but the paths to that independence varied enormously — from the negotiated transfers of British West Africa, to the settler-colony conflicts of Kenya and Zimbabwe, to the decades-long armed struggles Portugal's refusal to decolonise forced on Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau. Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 marked the end of the last major liberation war in southern Africa. The next lesson examines what this hard-won independence actually delivered — and where, and why, its promise was broken.