

COMMANDING HEIGHTS

Development in Africa

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India's independence in 1947 inspired nationalist movements and provided a model for decolonization and independence all over the world. By 1950, the old colonial order seemed to have lost its force, its historical relevance. Two world wars had thoroughly discredited the European powers' claim to a "civilizing mission." Back at home, colonial rule was losing its advocates, more and more of whom felt that the economic benefits no longer outweighed the growing burden of administering empires. And a new elite was on the rise throughout the colonies, made up of the lucky few who had acceded to Western education and returned with technical credentials as engineers, lawyers, or accountants. This new professional class had also absorbed Western political values, and could ably challenge colonial rule on its own terms. They formed political parties—inspired, in many cases, by the Congress Party of Nehru and Gandhi—and pressed for greater degrees of self-rule. They also became plausible candidates for a peaceful handover of power. In Britain and France—by far the two largest colonial powers—the view grew steadily in the 1950s that decolonization was inevitable. British prime minister Harold Macmillan called it "the wind of change." There would, of course, be exceptions. France would attempt to hold on to two of its colonies, Vietnam and Algeria, by force—an ultimately futile effort that would carry a dire human cost. Portugal would cling to Angola and Mozambique until its own transition from dictatorship to democracy in 1975.

The change was most striking in Africa. France granted independence to almost all its African colonies in a single year, 1960; Britain, more gradually, from 1957 to 1965. Almost everywhere, the process began with an interim self-rule government, the colonial power retaining ultimate control and responsibility for currency, defense, and foreign affairs. As momentum gathered, local groups expanded their scope of responsibility. By the time of the emotional flag-lowering ceremony at government house and the assumption of formal power by the elected local leaders, a peaceful transition had taken place. In the background, economic links usually remained intact.

The new leaders faced formidable challenges. Colonial infrastructure was scant, and what little existed was designed for swift extraction of natural resources, not for bolstering local trade and civic life. Where railways existed, they connected mines to ports; where roads were paved, they served plantations. Villages along these routes grew into trading posts, while historic centers on old commercial routes became backwaters. In the towns, public services were minimal. The typical electricity network in an African country on the eve of independence consisted of erratic diesel turbines that supplied the villas and offices of the colonial administration. Factories and wealthy traders installed their own generators. Water supply and telephones were similarly inadequate. Primary education and public health were rudimentary. With independence, town and country dwellers alike raised their hopes for rapid growth in all of these areas at the same time. And the new leaders, strained by the quick pace of change and the small numbers of qualified technical staff, became the custodians of these aspirations.