

Review Article

# The Role of International Solidarity Movements in Challenging Oppressive Regimes: A Comparative Study of Anti-Apartheid Activism in South Africa and Pro-Palestinian Advocacy in the 21st Century

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## ABSTRACT



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This paper contrasts two giant global solidarity movements the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa and pro-Palestinian advocacy in the 21st century. It discusses their historical backgrounds, tactics and influences and how transnational networks, grassroots mobilization, economic sanctions and media influenced their performance. The research allows conclusion that the anti-apartheid movement was won due to the extensive foreign assistance and sanctions imposed by the state with the help of such frameworks as Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs), Political Opportunity Theory and Resource Mobilization Theory. Conversely, the pro-Palestinian movement is geopolitically unpopular, in the legislature, and politically divided, which has weak global support. However, this movement serves as an indicator of the continued applicability of international activism in the quest of justice. The paper suggests to strengthen legal instruments, add economic pressure, better the media tactics and consolidate the partnership among advocacy. It adds to the debates on the element of the global civil society, human rights, and the possibilities of the international solidarity to impact the political change in the contemporary world.

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## Introduction

International solidarity movements have been instrumental to oppose tyrannical governments, promote human rights, and influence the political discussion in the global arena. The transnational advocacy of these movements is usually founded on the activists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society movements to mount pressure on the oppressive regimes internationally (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). The key examples of such activism are the anti-apartheid movement against South African government of the late 20th century and the modern pro-Palestinian movement of the 21st century. As these movements have diverse historical, and geopolitical setting, they have similar approaches, issues and goals as they all seek justice and self-determination.

The anti-apartheid movement that accelerated during the middle of the 20th century played a critical role in the destruction of the system of racial segregation institutionalized in South Africa. International solidarity actions forced the government of South Africa to abolish apartheid through economic sanctions, cultural boycotts, diplomatic isolation and

grassroots activism (Mandela, 1994). This movement was a perfect example of how a global activism, supported by local opposition, may bring radical political change. Likewise, the pro-Palestinian movement during the 21st century aims at questioning the Israeli policies in occupied Palestinian lands, through means of economic boycotts, legal activism and mobilization through social media (Barghouti, 2011). Such movements as the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) have been compared with anti-apartheid movements because of their focus on economic and cultural opposition (Bakan and Abu-Laban, 2009).

Although the periods of both movements differ, they both emphasize the strength of international advocacy in fighting state oppression. This paper will provide a comparative study of the two cases, strategies, effectiveness, and challenges of solidarity movements in raising global support. The research questions that will be used in the study are:

### Theoretical Framework Conceptual

Transnational activism is incomplete without international solidarity movements which organize collective action across

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boundaries to oppose oppression, promote human rights, and effect political transformation. In this section, the author captures the important concepts that were associated to international solidarity and the theoretical frameworks that contribute to the explanation of dynamics of such movements, specifically in the context of anti-apartheid movements in South Africa and pro-Palestinian movements in the 21 st century.

### Conceptual Framework

#### *International Solidarity Movements*

The collectivity of people, organizations and the states in aid of the oppressed groups across their boundaries is known as international solidarity (Smith et al., 1997). These movements work in different ways which include; economic sanctions, political lobbying, protests and cultural boycotts and online activism (Tarrow, 2005). Solidarity networks were of key importance in the case of South Africa in terms of the economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure that aggressively brought apartheid to its knees (Seidman, 2007). In the same light, the present day pro-Palestinian activism, especially the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, aims to put some economic and political pressure on Israel to correct the human rights abuses in the occupied Palestinian lands (Barghouti, 2011).

#### *Types of Activism in International Solidarity Movements*

The international solidarity movements employ several strategies to create awareness and mobilize the international action. These include:

- i. Grassroots Mobilization - NGOs and civil society groups as well as individuals locally and internationally use advocacy and direct-action campaigns (Keck and Sikkink, 1998).
- ii. Economic Boycotts and Sanctions - Coercive actions against oppressive governments to bring about political transformation (Nzimande, 2018).
- iii. Cultural and Academic Boycotts - Cultural and academic institutions are used as a resistance platform (Bakan and Abu-Laban, 2009).
- iv. Digital and Social Media activism - The internet and use of social media as advocacy, awareness and mobilization tools (Gerbaudo, 2012).

### Theoretical Framework

The success, tactics, and the origins of international solidarity movements can be explained using several theoretical approaches:

The theory of Transnational Advocacy Network (TAN) developed by Keck and Sikkink (1998) describes the operation of international solidarity movements as networks of connected groups of activists, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and institutions that pressure governments and international institutions to respond to human rights violations. A good example of the TANs in action is the anti-apartheid movement where the United Nations, Amnesty International and other grassroots organizations around the world pressured South Africa using the sustained advocacy strategy and economic sanctions. Similarly, BDS movement follows the same system whereby global networks are used to promote the rights of Palestinians (Barghouti, 2011).

According to the Political Opportunity Theory (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2001), the social movements will arise and flourish when the political environment, in terms of government instability, change in policies, or international pressure, provides mobilization opportunities. International anti-apartheid campaign took advantage of the changing cold war dynamics and emergence of the human rights discourses to initiate change in South Africa (Seidman, 2007). In the same manner, the changed world views regarding the Israel Palestine relations such as increased awareness of Palestinian rights in the

international arena has influenced pro-Palestinian advocacy (Bakan & Abu-Laban, 2009).

Resource Mobilization Theory (McCarthy and Zald, 1977) stresses on the role of financial, organizational and human resources in the maintenance of a social movement. The anti-apartheid movement also enjoyed wide global support in terms of financial aid, press reports, and diplomatic assistance of sympathetic governments (Nzimande, 2018). Pro-Palestinian activism is also dependent on international solidarity networks, humanitarian organizations financing, and mobilization of the diaspora communities to continue its activities (Bakan & Abu-Laban, 2009).

According to constructivist international relations theory, the world norms and values contribute to conditioning the behaviour of the state and determine the international activism (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). What helped the anti-apartheid movement to be successful was the change in the global norms that made apartheid seem as an intolerable human rights abuse. On the same note, pro-Palestinian activism aims at redefining the international understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by re-packaging the occupation as a human rights challenge and not a territorial one (Barghouti, 2011).

### Historical Background and Case Studies

The global movements of solidarity have always been at the forefront of aiding oppressed societies and defying dictatorship. Another notable example of global activism that presented transnational efforts to combat systemic injustices is the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa and the pro-Palestinian advocacy movement in the 21 st century. The section examines the historical context, influential personalities, tactics, and the results of these movements with a comparative view of how well they managed to oppose the oppressive constructs.

#### **The South African Anti-Apartheid Movement**

##### **Historical Background**

Institutionalized racial segregation and discrimination (Apartheid) was introduced officially in South Africa in 1948 by the National Party (Worden, 2012). It discriminated against non-white South Africans by disenfranchising them systematically, limiting their political liberties, economic and social freedoms. Domestic opposition efforts were spearheaded by the African National Congress (ANC) and other resistance groups, although the global solidarity was very important in keeping the struggle of liberation afloat (Mandela, 1994).

##### **Key Actors and International Solidarity**

The movements of international solidarity became a formidable campaign in the international struggle against apartheid, using the diplomatic, economic and cultural approaches to pressurize the South African government. Key actors included:

- i. The United Nations and Multilateral Organizations - UN General Assembly had criticized apartheid as early as 1962, and imposed arms embargo in 1977 and eventually supporting economic sanctions (United Nations, 1994).
- ii. Anti-Apartheid Movements (AAMs) - Non-governmental organizations such as the British AAM, American Committee on Africa and the European solidarity groups organized a movement of public opinion and political pressure (Seidman, 2007).
- iii. Economic Boycotts and Sanctions- Economic sanctions were issued by the governments and private institutions, which caused an exodus of capital and undermined the apartheid economy (Nzimande, 2018).
- iv. Cultural and Academic Boycotts - World artists, sports people and universities boycotted South African

institutions, which further isolated the regime (Gurney, 2000).

### Impact and Legacy

The entire action of internal resistance and international solidarity eventually resulted in the destruction of apartheid. As the South African government was becoming progressively poorer and diplomatically lonely, it entered the bargaining with the ANC, and the democratic transition of 1994 began (Mandela, 1994). The anti-apartheid movement proved that both the international pressure of the consistent character could lead to the systemic political transformation.

### Pro-Palestinian Advocacy in the 21st Century

The roots of Israeli-Palestinian conflict go back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the modern pro-Palestinian activist activism has been strengthened by the growing interest in Israeli settlements, military occupation, and abuse of human rights (Pappe, 2006). The war has been informed by various wars, unsuccessful peace talks and changing international alliances. Local resistance movements have been dominated by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), Hamas, and other civil society organizations, though the global solidarity movements have become more active in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Barghouti, 2011).

### Foreign Goodwill and Major Reinforcers

Similar to the anti-apartheid movement, pro-Palestinian groups are dependent on global networks to coerce governments, corporations and institutions. Considerable unity actions were organized. The first one is the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) Movement. BDS was initiated in 2005 and it requires economic and cultural boycotts to make Israel abide by international law (Barghouti, 2011). Secondly, the occupation is described as a human rights crisis and the policies of Israel have been documented and condemned by human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2021). Thirdly, social and digital activism. In contrast to the anti-apartheid campaign, current pro-Palestinian activism is deeply dependent on online activism, where viral campaigns involving civilian deaths and violence on the side of the state are used (Gerbaudo, 2012). Fourthly is the international law and legal advocacy. Palestinian activists and global legal scholars have filed cases in the international criminal court (ICC) and in the United Nations, to bring Israel to book on allegations of breaching international law (Falk, 2017).

### Impact and Challenges

The pro-Palestinian movement is confronted with major barriers particularly in politics and institutions even amid the increased international backing. In contrast to the South African apartheid, Israel has good diplomatic and economic relationships with the western world, and thus imposing sanctions and boycotts is harder (Bakan & Abu-Laban, 2009). Moreover, pro-Palestinian activism has been politically backfired with laws criminalizing or prohibiting BDS practices in some countries such as the United States and Germany (Barghouti, 2011). However, there is still the influence of the international solidarity processes on the discussion and shaping of the policy on relations between Israel and Palestine.

### Comparative Analysis: Similarities and Differences

Both movements share several similarities in their strategies and challenges:

Aspect	Anti-Apartheid Movement	Pro-Palestinian Advocacy
Oppressed Group	Non-white South Africans	Palestinians
Oppressive Regime	South African Apartheid Government	Israeli occupation policies
International Solidarity Tactics	Economic sanctions, cultural boycotts, diplomatic pressure	BDS, legal advocacy, social media activism
Key Success Factors	Widespread international consensus, economic pressure, UN sanctions	Growing grassroots activism, legal advocacy
Major Challenges	Cold War politics delayed action, corporate resistance to sanctions	Strong Western alliances with Israel, legal restrictions on BDS

Although the success of the anti-apartheid movement eventually resulted in the South African government ending apartheid, pro-Palestinian advocacy still has to struggle against political pressure and legal obstacles, which means that the whole struggle is more complicated and prolonged.

### Comparative Analysis

Solidarity movements across the world have been very instrumental in confronting repressive states by organizing the transnational networks to impose economic, political, and social pressure. The anti-apartheid movement of South Africa and the pro-Palestinian advocacy movement of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are both similar in their goals, tactics and struggles but also have certain differences because of historical, geopolitical and social backgrounds. This paper gives a comparative evaluation of these movements on various levels, emphasizing on their success, challenges, and future of global activism.

### Objectives and Goals

Both movements aim at bringing down oppressive systems, which can be achieved by using international solidarity and advocacy:

Aspect	Anti-Apartheid Movement	Pro-Palestinian Advocacy
Primary Objective	End racial segregation and political disenfranchisement in South Africa	End Israeli occupation, settlement expansion, and human rights violations in Palestine
Core Demands	Universal suffrage, dismantling apartheid laws, release of political prisoners	Right of return for Palestinian refugees, end to occupation, equal rights for Palestinians
Long-Term Goal	Establishment of a democratic, multiracial South Africa	Establishment of Palestinian state or equal rights within a single state

The anti-apartheid movement had a clear, universally accepted objective, ending apartheid, whereas pro-Palestinian advocacy is fragmented between calls for a two-state solution, a single binational state, or other forms of resolution (Barghouti, 2011; Seidman, 2007).

### Strategies and Tactics

Despite operating in different historical periods, both movements have utilized similar methods to mobilize support and exert pressure on oppressive regimes:

Strategy	Anti-Apartheid Movement	Pro-Palestinian Advocacy
Grassroots Mobilization	Local and international anti-apartheid organizations (ANC, UDF, AAM)	Palestinian NGOs, global solidarity groups, student movements (SJP, PSC)
Economic Boycotts	Trade embargoes, corporate divestment, financial sanctions	Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement
Cultural & Academic Boycotts	Sporting bans, academic restrictions on South Africa	Cultural and academic boycotts of Israel
Political Lobbying	UN resolutions, diplomatic pressure, governmental sanctions	UN resolutions, ICC cases, state recognition of Palestine
Media & Awareness	Print media, documentaries, global protests	Social media activism, online campaigns, digital journalism

While both movements emphasize economic boycotts, the anti-apartheid movement benefited from more widespread state-level sanctions, whereas pro-Palestinian advocacy faces significant resistance from Western governments allied with Israel (Nzimande, 2018; Bakan & Abu-Laban, 2009).

### Role of International Institutions and Governments

The effectiveness of international solidarity movements is often shaped by the level of support or opposition they receive from global institutions and states:

Institution	Anti-Apartheid Movement	Pro-Palestinian Advocacy
United Nations	UN General Assembly and Security Council condemned apartheid, imposed sanctions	UN recognizes Palestinian rights but faces U.S. veto on enforcement measures
Western Governments	Gradual shift towards anti-apartheid sanctions in the 1980s	Mixed responses; U.S. and EU support Israel, while some Global South countries recognize Palestine
Corporate & Financial Institutions	Divestment from South African companies	Selective divestment, but resistance from major financial players
Regional Organizations	African Union, Commonwealth expelled South Africa	Arab League and Organization of Islamic Cooperation support Palestinian cause

Unlike South Africa, which became a global pariah, Israel retains strong diplomatic and military alliances with powerful

Western nations, limiting the effectiveness of international pressure (Falk, 2017; Worden, 2012).

### Challenges and Resistance

Both movements have faced considerable challenges, including legal, political, and ideological resistance:

Challenge	Anti-Apartheid Movement	Pro-Palestinian Advocacy
Political Opposition	South African government banned ANC, imposed censorship	Pro-Palestinian activists face criminalization in Western countries
Corporate Resistance	Businesses initially resisted divestment but later withdrew under pressure	Western corporations often refuse to engage with BDS demands
Media Narratives	Western media initially framed ANC as terrorist; later shifted support	Pro-Israel narratives dominate mainstream Western media
Internal Divisions	Conflicts between ANC and rival groups (Inkatha Freedom Party)	Divisions among Palestinian factions (PLO, Hamas)
Legal Barriers	Apartheid laws criminalized resistance activities	Anti-BDS laws in the U.S. and Europe restrict activism

While both movements have been framed as controversial, pro-Palestinian advocacy faces greater legal restrictions in key Western countries, hindering its ability to apply pressure (Barghouti, 2011; Pappé, 2006).

### Impact and Effectiveness

The impact of international solidarity movements depends on their ability to shift public opinion, influence policy, and contribute to tangible political changes:

Outcome	Anti-Apartheid Movement	Pro-Palestinian Advocacy
End of Oppressive Regime	Achieved in 1994 with democratic elections	Ongoing struggle, no resolution yet
Governmental Change	ANC came to power, apartheid dismantled	No clear political breakthrough yet
Economic Consequences	South Africa suffered economic isolation	Israel remains economically strong despite BDS efforts
Global Public Opinion	Widespread global condemnation of apartheid	Increasing but divided opinions on Israel-Palestine
Institutional Recognition	Mandela and ANC recognized as legitimate leaders	Palestinian statehood recognition remains contested

The anti-apartheid movement succeeded in toppling the South African regime, whereas pro-Palestinian advocacy continues to face geopolitical and economic challenges that prevent a similar breakthrough (Seidman, 2007; Nzimande, 2018).

### Conclusion and Recommendations.

#### Conclusion

The analysis between the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa and the pro-Palestinian advocacy movement in the 21 st

century is a remedy of how global solidarity can be strong in fighting oppressive governments. Both movements have organized international networks to impose political, economic and cultural pressure on the existing systems of oppression in the world, which include economic sanctions, diplomacy, media campaigns, and grassroots campaigns. Nevertheless, the paths and the consequences of both of them are quite different because of the differences in the geopolitical situation, the institutional support of the global community, and the degree of opposition of the strong states.

The anti-apartheid movement took advantage of an apparent world-wide agreement of the wickedness of apartheid, as a result of which sanctions and diplomatic isolation against South Africa were widespread, as well as corporate divestment. These forces along with an internal resistance resulted into the eventual end of apartheid in 1994. On the other hand, the pro-Palestinian advocacy movement is still confronting serious challenges such as powerful political and military backing of Israel by the west, legal restrictions of Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, and division within the Palestinian leadership. The international awareness and solidarity of Palestinian rights has not yet found a solution, and this fact shows the sophistication of the modern global activism.

This analogy indicates that although international solidarity movements may be effective in creating awareness and marshalling foundations, their achievement is predominantly subject to geopolitical associations, the likelihood of the more powerful nations to execute meaningful penalties and the ability of the subjected group to resist.

### Recommendations

As a result of the lessons learned during this comparative examination, it is possible to recommend that international solidarity movements can be empowered to some degree by the following recommendations in their battle against oppressive regimes:

- i. Empowering international law through the need to enforce international legal systems, including resolutions by the UN, international human rights and indictments by the International Criminal Court (ICC), to hold the oppressive governments to account.
- ii. Reduction of economic and political pressure by means of enhanced alliances with progressive policymakers and political parties to introduce and champion legislative actions, which oppose economic and military aid to tyrannical regimes.
- iii. Increasing awareness of the public and media approaches by engaging in long-term advocacy towards one-sided media discourse by investing in independent journalism, documentary filmmaking, and digital advocacy that is based on the realities of oppression.
- iv. Finally, coordination of advocacy work on an international level so that local resistance groups and international solidarity organizations can work more closely with one another to guarantee a well-coordinated and strategy-focused way of working.

- v. Solving internal division and empowering local leadership. The investment in leadership development programs that provide activists with skills and knowledge to continue advocacy activities on the long-term basis.

### Final Thoughts

The way to justice and emancipation can be long and difficult but the history of the world has been able to prove that the constant international unity can make a difference in overthrowing the repressive orders. The global anti-apartheid movement provides both an example of how transnational mobilization can be used to overcome established injustices as well as the current pro-Palestinian mobilization initiative is shown to be more dynamic in the digital era. With the help of refinement, reinforcement of alliances and resilience, solidarity movements can still have a significant pressure in the human rights and self-determination struggle.

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