

## **South African Human Rights Statements**

The Freedom Charter, adopted in 1955 at the Congress of the People in Kliptown near Johannesburg, was a seminal political document in modern South African history.

The South African government at that time argued that it was treasonous, and it arrested 156 people in December 1956, accusing them at the “Treason Trial” of seeking to overthrow the state by adopting this charter. The charter was adopted by the United Democratic Front in the 1980s and was an historical backdrop to drafting of the Bill of Rights of the new South African Constitution that was ratified by the South African Parliament following the April 1994 elections.

The Freedom Charter has been hailed as one of the most important modern human rights documents:

If the modern human rights movement began with the UN [United Nations] Declaration, then the Freedom Charter was an early, innovative contribution to the discourse, a refutation of the claim that human rights was the special child of the West, and an affirmation of a uniquely African, holistic vision of rights.

*Human Rights and the South African Freedom Charter: Law, Justice, and Political Movements*

Harvard Law School June 16, 2005

[www.sapartners.org/documents/freedomcharter.pdf](http://www.sapartners.org/documents/freedomcharter.pdf)

These five documents help us understand the significance of South Africa’s contribution to the international vision of human rights.

### **1. The Atlantic Charter from the standpoint of African within the Union of South Africa and Bill of Rights**

<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/claims.html>

### **2. Universal Declaration of Human Rights**

<http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>

### **3. Freedom Charter**

<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/charter.html>

### **4. South African Constitution Bill of Rights**

<http://www.info.gov.za/documents/constitution/1996/96cons2.htm>

### **5. U.S. Constitution Bill of Rights**

<http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/facts/funddocs/billeng.htm>

Choose any of the following pairs of documents to compare:

*1 and 3*      *2 and 4*      *3 and 4*      *4 and 5*

First, complete a “Document Analysis Worksheet” about each document.

Then write a one-page paper discussing the similarities and differences between the two statements. What concepts of human rights did they hold in common? What human rights are considered most important? What concepts appear in one document and not in the other? Conclude by stating what reasons you think might account for the relationship between the two documents.

Enter your paper on the group blog created for this assignment. Read and comment on at least two other papers posted on the blog.

### **Additional Resources**

#### **Atlantic Charter (1941)**

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/wwii/atlantic.htm>

#### **Growth in United Nations membership, 1945-present**

<http://www.un.org/members/growth.shtml>

This can be used to identify members of the United Nations when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted.

#### **History of the Freedom Charter**

[http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/governance-projects/freedom-charter/01\\_history.htm](http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/governance-projects/freedom-charter/01_history.htm)  
by South African History Online

#### **Celebrating 50 Years of the Freedom Charter June 26, 1955 – 2005**

[www.sahistory.org.za/pages/pdf/Freedom%20Charter-reduced.pdf](http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/pdf/Freedom%20Charter-reduced.pdf)  
South African Department of Education

#### **Images of Human Rights**

<http://www.durbanet.co.za/exhib/dag/hr/bg.htm>

Including “The Birth of the Bill of Rights” by David McQuoid-Mason, Chairperson, Durban Regional Committee Lawyers for Human Rights, for *Images of Human Rights*