



Photos of South Africa Show a Country Still Divided

By Whitney Richardson Oct. 24, 2017

[Link to story](#) on NYTimes.com

Joao Silva came of age as a photographer documenting [social upheaval in South Africa](#). Between the early 1990s — when apartheid ended — to the country’s first democratic election in 1994, Mr. Silva, a staff photographer for The New York Times, captured deadly political violence that eventually led to the abolition of its system of racial segregation.

Two decades later, Mr. Silva still finds that stark social tensions continue to divide the country. The divisions are in as much economic terms as they are racial.

“With apartheid gone, with the National party gone, we had this dream that it was all going to be sorted out,” said Mr. Silva, who was born in Portugal and immigrated to South Africa at the age of 9. “Of course, it’s naïve — it is not an easy thing to come to terms with.”

For one month, Mr. Silva [traveled through the country on assignment](#) to photograph the different economic classes dividing South Africa’s residents. Mr. Silva has built his career around documenting political unrest — in his adopted home of South Africa, as well as in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Sudan.

But working in conflict regions took a personal toll. In 2010, while on assignment in Kandahar, Afghanistan, he stepped on a land mine, [losing both of his legs](#). After months of intense surgery at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and receiving high-tech prosthetic legs, he slowly began the process of learning how to walk and photograph again, a situation akin to what his country is going through with democratic rule.

During [his most recent assignment](#) traveling across South Africa, Mr. Silva found a land of stark contrasts: A densely populated township bordering Cape Town, blanketed with broken glass and garbage (slide 1).

Less than an hour drive away, scantily-dressed women posed for pictures in an upscale nightclub as expensive champagne flowed freely. In Durban, a coastal city to the east, young surfers prepared to challenge the early morning waves (slide 3).

The economic disparities facing South Africans can be traced back to the first few years after apartheid, when the government transferred large sections of land to the wealthy white elite. Today, 10 percent of all South Africans — mostly white — own more than 90 percent of the national wealth. Almost 80 percent of the population — mostly black — have no land ownership.

Despite these trends, Mr. Silva has slowly seen the rise of middle-class black South Africans in areas like Soweto, a township outside Johannesburg. Once home to Nelson Mandela, it was the center of the anti-apartheid movement and the location of one the country's deadliest [youth uprising in 1976](#). Today, its streets are filled with vibrant restaurants with young black South Africans and tourists.

During his reporting, Mr. Silva also met a growing number of entrepreneurs, including Mandla Majabula, who recently opened an internet cafe in Soweto and taught himself how to code. According to New World Wealth, a consulting firm in Johannesburg, the number of South Africa's black, Asian and mixed-race millionaires more than doubled from 2007 to 2015. For this assignment, Mr. Silva said he was looking for quiet moments that captured "human aspects" of each location, which is what he has always tried to embody in his work, even when covering conflict.

At one stop, he visited an early morning class at the Sophumelela Secondary School in Mitchells Plain, one of South Africa's largest townships (slide 2). The light illuminated a group of young boys in their school uniforms, huddled together as they studied from a shared notebook. The moment for Mr. Silva captured South Africa's past, yet optimism for an uncertain, yet brighter, future.

"It is still very much about the human condition in those kinds of situations, even though now the element of danger is not there," he said.

Mr. Silva considers himself among the lucky few in South Africa who were able to improve their socioeconomic status through education and entrepreneurial pursuits. Growing up in a working class home in the south of Johannesburg, he began studying photography at the age of 21. He later gained recognition as a member of the [Bang Bang Club](#), a quartet of photojournalists who covered the country's transition to democracy.

"Even in my current physical limitation, I am still out there going," said Mr. Silva. "I spent so many years focusing on conflict, but life is different now and I am changing with everything else that comes with it."

Whitney Richardson is a photo editor on the Business and Technology desk at The New York Times and former producer of the Lens blog.