Pass raids and random arrests were a regular feature of life under apartheid. This resulted in the criminalising of hundreds of thousands of South Africans.

The Separate Amenities Act of 1953 forced black and white people to use separate public facilities such as parks, beaches, buses and public toilets.
Professor Z. K. Matthews of Fort Hare University and prominent ANC leader was the inspiration behind the idea of a Congress of the People or ‘people’s parliament.’ This mass gathering would generate a vision of an alternative society, based on democratic values.

The ‘thumbs up’ sign was first used as a victory salute in World War II. It was adopted by the Congress Alliance in the resistance campaigns of the 1950s to convey the spirit of inevitable victory.
In March 1954, a National Action Council was established to carry out the Freedom Charter Campaign. It would mobilise thousands of volunteers to gather the demands of ordinary people throughout the country. During the collection of demands, thousands of leaflets like this one were distributed urging people to ‘Speak of Freedom.’ This process would culminate in a mass assembly where demands would be adopted by delegates representing communities from all over the country.

Source: Wits Historical Papers
Canvassing a group of workers in Fordsburg, Johannesburg, for the Freedom Charter Campaign. Volunteer Martin Mafefo Ramokgodi said: *i Volontiya* was a person who actually took initiative. A volunteer had to be simple and sincere. Photo: Eli Weinberg, UWC/RIM/Mayibuye Archive.
The Congress of the People was held over two days in a field in Kliptown, just outside Johannesburg. Up to 7 000 people from all over the country attended.

Source: Wits Historical Papers
Delegates were welcomed by children neatly dressed in boy scout uniforms. Planks resting on bricks provided the seating for delegates. Photo: Eli Weinberg, UWC/RIM/Maiibuye Archive
People arrived carrying posters reflecting their demands. As volunteer, A.S. Chetty put it: They were pouring in, pouring in. Bus loads, lorry loads, motor cars. People on foot. They were coming from everywhere.

Photo: Ed Weinberg, UmkBen/Mapubule Archive
Women delegates arriving from the Transkei.

There was singing going on. Eating. Distribution of pamphlets. Reading. People talking. Spirits were high at the Congress of the People.
Letter from Elizabeth Molete from Sopiatown expressing the demands of her community.

Poster produced by the Federation of South African Women, calling all women in the Johannesburg area to attend a meeting to express their demands.

We demand:
1. The right to own a farm, home, and the land on which we live.
2. The right to have access to churches.
3. The right to have schools at lower rates of interest.
4. Property made roads and storm water drainage.
5. Better shopping facilities, particularly in non-European townships.
6. The right of all people to live and work as they wish.
7. That no person be required to carry a pass or register.
8. The right to vote.

Elizabeth Molete
8 Betha Street
Sophia坨坨
Women and men from Western Native Township make their presence felt as they demand equal human rights, work and security for all. Photo: Eli Weinberg, UWC/RIM/Mayibuye Archive
At the first session, the Isitwalandwe medal, the highest award given by the ANC to people who have made an outstanding contribution to the liberation struggle, was presented to Chief Albert Luthuli, Dr Y. M. Dadoo and Father Trevor Huddleston. Only Trevor Huddleston was there to receive the medal. The other two were banned at the time.
Chief Luthuli's daughter, Albertina, Dr W. Z. Conco, ANC representative and chairperson of the gathering, and Mr Pieter Beyleveld, representative of SACOD, on the platform at the Congress of the People discussing the demands of the Freedom Charter. Chief Luthuli himself was banned at the time and therefore unable to be present.
CPC delegate Eileen van de Vindt from the Western Cape remembers: Every delegate there was a speaker. You know, if anyone was called upon to say something he would be able to articulate his grievances, and say something about his plight in South Africa. That was the most inspiring thing of all.

Photo: Eli Weinberg, UWCAMS/Myburgh Archive
At Kliptown, Es’kia Mphahlele read the clause of the Freedom Charter that related to education. The doors of learning and culture shall be opened.

Gutter education was challenged by all sectors of the population. The church declared that, he who does not oppose the Bantu Education Act is as guilty in the eyes of God as the man that implements the act.

Photos: Ernest Cole, Estate of the late M.M. Krole
The Congress wheel symbolised the multiracialism of the Congress Alliance. A campaign to collect a million signatures aimed to popularise the Freedom Charter after the Congress of the People. For various reasons, and mainly due to state repression, this campaign was not very successful. (Photo: Eli Weinberg, UWC/RIM/Mayibuye Archive)
My friend and I were in the Parade in Cape Town, getting people to sign copies of the Charter. Suddenly the police arrived... They wanted to get the signature form with the Freedom Charter from my friend. So she swallowed it, quick.

Eileen Van der Vindt
Photo: Front page of the Golden City Post, 11 March 1956
On 5 December 1956, crowds of supporters gathered outside the Johannesburg Drill Hall during the Treason Trial where 156 Congress leaders were being charged with treason. If found guilty, they could be sentenced to death. 

Photo: Eli Weinberg, UWC/RMM/Mayibuye Archive
Youth display enthusiasm for the Freedom Charter at a UDF rally in February 1985, at the Jabulani Amphitheatre in Soweto.  

Photo: Paul Weinberg, South Photographs