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Legacies and Meanings of the United Democratic Front (UDF) Period for Contemporary South Africa

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In essence South Africa is at a crossroads. At one stop some former exiles live in glittering opulence, while at the other the true soldiers of our struggle have been left in bewildering proximity to unendurable poverty. It is antithetical that the former *amaqabane,* or comrades, who are the true (and sadly unsung) liberators of our country are now virtually pariahs in the land they forcibly liberated from the vices of apartheid. While the exiles were fighting imaginary enemies in godforsaken jungles, *amaqabane* were crossing swords—or rather exchanging stones for bullets—with the real enemy, the unforgivable apartheid government, the presumed antagonists of the exiles. In actuality these people, to whom our country is undoubtedly and markedly indebted, have been obliquely driven to the shadows. One such forgotten hero is Motsele Mahapa, [who said]: 'I feel bad that most people who were active in the emancipation of our country are now permanent residents of our deluged prisons, while the so-called exiles are now the heroes of the day'. The irony of it all is that when Umkhonto we Sizwe [the Spear of the Nation, the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC), colloquially referred to as MK] failed in its ill-fated hit-and-run raids, it consulted the comrades to increase its own backing in the townships—and then, suddenly, *amaqabane* were expendable (Thokozani Mhlongo 2003).

[In the period of Thabo Mbeki's ascendancy] the ideas of the Freedom Charter and the aspirations of the UDF were now buried if not yet dead. The Freedom Charter's principle of non-racialism had begun to go with

the return of the exiles in 1990; unlike the UDF, says Max du Preez, the exiles only knew a handful of white comrades (Kenneth Good 2002:161)

But there was always that tension between people who believed the UDF could help the liberation struggle by putting pressure on the government internally and those, especially people in exile, who felt threatened by the UDF (Ryland Fisher 2003).

Why should we mark the anniversary of the UDF—is there a mischievous intent?[1] Are we celebrating a period of existence of a set of organisations because of their instrumental value? Are we marking this period because the UDF and its affiliates contributed substantially towards the liberation of South Africa? Or are we acknowledging their role in bringing the ANC into the mainstream of South African politics, and thus completing tasks set by the ANC? (see Chikane 2003). Or do we see the UDF period representing an alternative to or going beyond the type of democracy and politics that exists today? Does the UDF have a lasting significance, which may or may not be realised within contemporary South African politics? Did the UDF period provide amplifications of our previous understandings of democracy and liberation, and, if so, how and in what way? (see Neocosmos 1998; Cherry 1999, 2000).

Commemorating the anniversary of the UDF may be interpreted as having a mischievous intent. This is because it is often introduced in contemporary discussion in order to contrast how it functioned or allegedly operated with styles of work of the ANC in exile (and, to some extent, the leadership emerging from Robben Island). This feeds into the type of sentiments found in the quotations at the beginning of this chapter. When one commemorates the UDF one is invited to look back to a golden age of popular democracy, which is contrasted with what has happened today, with the alleged exile dominance over the ANC and government (see the title of John Daniel's paper: 'The Mbeki Presidency: Lusaka wins', Daniel 2003; Good 2002; Pallo Jordan interview, 2003, contests, statistically, the notion of exile dominance of ANC and government).

There is some truth and some exaggeration and romanticisation and demonisation in these perceptions
The object of this chapter is to argue for the importance of the period of the UDF, not merely for institutions or constitutional structures of a particular kind, but for what can be drawn from the period. What important practices and values should we try to retain, retrieve or preserve from that phase and take into the present? This is a separate question from whether, and in what ways, the UDF contributed to the pre-eminence of the ANC and its victory.

This is because for all the exaggeration or romanticisation, that moment of the UDF and the 1980s represented something different from what had previously (and has subsequently, for that matter) been experienced in the history of the liberation struggle and was a different experience from that of the ANC in exile.[2] It is also necessary to ask whether some qualities are lacking in the present, which may be remedied by recourse to some of the ideas and experiences of the 1980s, or, alternatively, whether we choose a path of democracy that excludes or already incorporates that experience.

When Jeremy Seekings quotes Walter Sisulu remarking that the UDF placed 'the central question of political power on the agenda…' (2000: 3), the issue is in what way power was raised, and whether it problematised and advanced the question in a manner that had not previously been done. It will be argued that the UDF period introduced democratic possibilities and understandings that may not previously have been articulated within the South African struggle. The legacies and meanings of this period are considered under a number of headings, which are by no means exhaustive and may not rank as the most important, though, in my view, many are. Finally, if the legacy is worth elaboration or has importance, we need to ask how it should influence contemporary politics. That crucial question I leave for future debate (but see Suttner 2004, 2004b).

Mass character and contribution of the UDF period to the demise of apartheid

The period of the UDF represented a mass upsurge on a scale the country had never previously seen, which was probably the decisive element in ensuring that a negotiated settlement became possible. It was, however, part of, and connected to, a wider attack on apartheid, covering a range of fields of activity over a considerable length of time. It involved a broad spectrum of people engaged in a variety of political and wider activities that cumulatively weakened the apartheid regime.

While an insurrectionary climate prevailed in the mid 1980s, the forces of resistance, allied to the ANC, lacked the capacity to overthrow the government. Nevertheless, even at moments of greatest repression, the possibility of governability, sustaining apartheid rule over time, was no longer there. In that sense the periods of ungovernability and people's power, together with international isolation, the attacks by MK, underground ANC propaganda and other activities, created conditions that made the regime's agenda unviable. That both sides were able to prevent the realisation of each other's goals without fully achieving their own, what Antonio Gramsci referred to as a state of politics where 'the siege is a reciprocal one', created conditions that made a negotiated settlement possible (Gramsci 1971: 238-9).

The UDF contribution towards democratic thinking, democratic accountability and notions and practices of popular power

The 1980s introduced modes of practising politics that had never previously been seen in South Africa, that may well condition people's expectations today (cf. Cherry 1999: 404). Here, one thinks of notions such as 'popular democracy', 'people's power', 'self-empowerment', 'the masses driving the process', 'democracy from below', 'and creativity of the masses' (cf. Morobe 1987: 81-95; Neocosmos 1998, 195: 241).

There may have been abuses of various kinds in the period of popular power, but there were nevertheless important contributions and achievements that introduced reinterpretations and new notions into South African democratic discourse. In particular, the period constituted in part a reinterpretation or deepening of the interpretation of the Freedom Charter[3] (cf. Morobe 1987). In many ways this was self-consciously the case, with activists seeing their activity in the street committees or other organs of people's power, as implementation of the first clause of the Freedom Charter, declaring that 'The People Shall Govern!' Thus, in an interview in the mid 1980s Weza Made of Uitenhage remarked:

> Generally, ya, I can say the community is the main source of power, because the state has really lost the control over the people. He has no power over the people in terms of controlling them. This is why the people have formed these area committees, so that they can try to control themselves. What has been preached in the past about the Freedom Charter, even now we are trying to do that practically (Interview, 1986).

The period may also have substantially extended the practice and understanding of non-racialism, non-sexism and other values beyond that of the 1950s, but without removing or raising all of the problems associated with these categories. Before too much is claimed, we should remember that while people at leadership level or those who attended UDF General Councils may have encountered activists from other communities, the vast majority of affiliates may never have met a person from the white or Indian or Coloured community in their political activities. In that sense, while the principle of non-racialism may have been there, the extent of practice will have varied. Likewise, we need to interrogate how deeply values like non-sexism were integrated into peoples' thinking and practice and the related organisational questions and barriers surrounding these issues (cf. Hassim 2003).

Prefigurative democracy

The period represented a notion of 'prefigurative democracy'. By this is meant that people did not understand democracy as being inaugurated on one day, after which all the practices and ideals they cherished would come into effect. They understood that their daily practices were part of the process of building the 'new South Africa'. Means and ends became fused; the democratic means were part of the democratic ends. In fact, what was being done at the time was seen as valuable in itself and not merely valuable in an instrumental sense, contributing towards a distant goal when the (problematic) notion of transfer of power to the people would take place.

Mufson refers to statements and notes of the assassinated UDF and Cradock leader, Matthew Goniwe, emphasising the notion of building the future in immediate practices:

> We want young men and women who are embodiments of the new SA... I f we are instruments of change, we MUST epitomise [the] society we want to bring about. [You] cannot over-drink and hope people will see you as representing a new society. [You] cannot be promiscuous [and] still tell people about [ending the] exploitation of women (Mufson 1990:112, emphasis in original.)

And again, Mosiuoa 'Terror' Lekota, then Publicity Secretary of the UDF said:

> In political struggle…the means must always be the same as the ends…How can one expect a racialistic movement to imbue our society with a non-racial character on the dawn of our freedom day? A political movement cannot bequeath to society a characteristic it does not itself possess. To expect it to do so is like asking a heathen to convert a person to Christianity. The principles of that religion are unknown to the heathen let alone the practice (Anthony W. Marx 1992:124).

Likewise, leading UDF national figure, Murphy Morobe, provided one of the most clearly elaborated outlines of the conception of democracy then prevalent:

> [A] democratic South Africa is one of the aims or goals of our struggle. This can be summed up in the principal slogan of the Freedom Charter: 'The People Shall Govern!' In the second place, democracy is the means by which we conduct the struggle. This refers to the democratic character of our existing mass-based organisations. It is useful to separate these two levels, but obviously they are also connected. By developing active, mass-based democratic organisations and democratic practices within these organisations, we are laying the basis for a future, democratic South Africa.

> The creation of democratic *means* is for us as important as having democratic *goals* as our objective. Too often models of a future democratic South Africa are put forward which bear no relation to existing organisations, practices and traditions of political struggle in this country. What is possible in the future depends on what we are able to create and sustain now. A democratic South Africa will not be fashioned only after transference of political power to the majority has taken place, nor will it be drawn up according to blueprints and plans that are the products of conferences and seminars. The creation of a democratic South Africa can only become a reality with the participation... Our democratic aim …is control over every aspect of our lives, and not just the right (important as it is) to vote for a central government every four to five years. …When we say that the people shall govern, we mean at all levels and in all spheres, and we demand that there be real, effective control on a daily basis (Morobe 1987:81-2, emphasis in the original).

The problem with the notion of transfer of power to the people lies partly in its instrumentalism, that, at a particular moment, something called power is handed over, a 'thing' is passed from one set of rulers to another, and after that something completely different is done. Poulantzas has correctly remarked:

> To take or capture state power is not simply to lay hands on part of the state machinery in order to replace it with a second power. Power is not a quantifiable substance held by the state that must be taken out of its hands, but rather a series of relations among the various social classes… The State is neither a thing-instrument that may be taken away, nor a fortress that may be penetrated by means of a wooden horse, nor yet a safe that may be cracked by burglary: it is the heart of the exercise of political power (Poulantzas 2000:257-8. See also Hobsbawm 1982:24 ff., on Antonio Gramsci's focus before and beyond the moment of 'transfer of power').

The instrumental conception of power tends to devalue immediate activity, whose relevance is seen as purely in relation to realising something else—the seizure or transfer of power at some decisive moment in the future. This is a notion that converges with classic Marxist-Leninist texts as well as general conceptions of transition held by most national liberation movements (Lenin 1968, Suttner 2004).[4]

The notion of democracy of the UDF period was more complex, though not always adequately or fully articulated or realised. It did envisage the notion of 'transfer of power', but it simultaneously saw people building democracy at that very moment. It envisaged establishing elements of people's power immediately, transforming relationships of power, between powerful and

powerless even before the moment of 'taking state power' when the people would ultimately govern themselves at the level of the central state.

In that sense it involved a conception, which has in practice come to have relevance to the way the democratic transition unfolded, where there has not been one decisive moment of 'transfer' with all else following. Power has been 'transferred' since 1994, but all sorts of institutions and relationships still have to be transformed in order to ensure that peoples' lives are changed.

People understood what they were doing in the 1980s as a moment of self-empowerment, where they did not wait for leaders to tell them what to do, but directly exercised their democratic rights in their political practice. The UDF leadership was present and the ANC, in particular, gave broad strategic direction. But people on the ground were more than mere instruments implementing what others advised or instructed. They were direct actors, who decided what should be done and how and in so doing exercised considerable creativity.

People's power and conditions for its success and failure

The notion of people's power was not unprecedented in South Africa. Govan Mbeki recorded the existence of people's courts in the Pondoland rising of the 1950s and there are no doubt other examples that can be so classified (Mbeki 1984:25). Some people, especially in the Eastern Cape, saw the M-Plan of the 1950s, one of whose components was street-level organisation, as a precedent for the People's Power period (see Cherry 1999:403-4). The M-Plan was developed by the ANC after the Communist Party was declared illegal, on the expectation of its being proscribed. It was a preparation for ANC underground organisation (Suttner 2003).

But the UDF appropriation of the traditions of the 1950s did not always take account of, or was not fully aware of, its contradictory character. Thus, the conception of the M-Plan also entailed strong elements of top down/transmission of leadership decisions (cf. Suttner 2003:32-134). In contrast, the People's Power period was on the whole a 'bottom up' experience and the notions informing it theoretically were primarily from the grassroots upwards.[5] Yet the power and promise of the UDF period had its ups and downs, moments of great creativity and democratic involvement and also abuse, with 'kangaroo courts' and intolerance of diversity. It is important to identify, insofar as we can, what conditions were most conducive to success, meaning popular democracy without abuse, intolerance and violence, and what conditions most likely to result in the negative features. This is partly related to periodisation of the UDF experience. The times of most successful popular power depended on the intensity of state repression. The lower the intensity the greater the

likelihood for successful exercise of popular power. The period of the states of emergency (1985-89, with a short break when it was temporarily lifted in 1986) saw the arrest of almost all the most experienced leaders and a situation where, in many communities, the youth took command. More violence was then practised and less broad community involvement secured (see also Neocosmos 1998:202-210).[6]

People's power was usually most successful where representatives from a wide range of sectors determined action on behalf of and in consultation with the community. This wide representativity was especially important in the enforcement of consumer boycotts. Where this element of broad involvement was lacking, coercion often resulted. Likewise, crime control could work effectively where it enjoyed the greatest community involvement and consent. It could degenerate into violence and abuse where only sections of the community, who were able to exact punishments, took command.

The UDF period saw some examples, in Port Alfred, for instance, where community representatives of a broad character managed important aspects of township life. The fleeing of government officials left a vacuum, which the civic structures filled. The Bantu Administration[7] building was taken over and turned into a much-needed crèche. The same period saw extensive community action, including consumer boycotts enforced without resort to violence (interview with Gugile Nkwinti 1986; see also Mufson 1990).

In Atteridgeville, Uitenhage, Fort Beaufort, Port Elizabeth, Mamelodi at times, Graaf Reinet and other places, community efforts at crime control at a street and block level saw significant results insofar as residents as a whole were involved and the activities were seen as fulfilling a social goal that was regarded as broadly necessary (interviews with Titus Mafolo and Mapheti Leeuw regarding Atteridgeville and Weza Made regarding Uitenhage, 1986). Crime control is often equated with the existence of people's courts. My impression from research in 1985/6 is that most of the more successful examples of popular justice did not entail the existence of courts.

In various parts of the country, as the state of emergency took its toll on experienced leadership, it was easier for the less experienced youth who tended to want quick results, or criminal elements, to assume command. This often led to extensive violence and degeneration of popular organs into vehicles of terror.

The UDF as both an agent of the ANC as well as autonomous actor

The relationship between the ANC and UDF is an important and difficult question to uncover. There are some statements of ANC figures suggesting that the ANC set up the UDF or directed the UDF, as the apartheid state alleged. There is no doubt that the ANC had for some years wanted to see the

development of mass organisation within the country, the reoccupation of the leadership space by organisations advancing the broad vision of the Congress movement[8] (cf ANC Green Book 1979). It is clear that establishment of a broad front of popular organisations corresponded in many respects with what was required and recognised by the ANC as necessary to remedy organisational deficiency on the ground (Barrell 1992; ANC 1979). The opening up of 'legal space' in order to pursue mass mobilisation and organisation constituted what the ANC described as one of its 'four pillars' of struggle.[9] But that does not mean the ANC 'set up' the UDF nor that it controlled the UDF and its affiliates. This is well captured in an interview of the late ANC President, Oliver Tambo, originally published in 1984:

> We called for united action to resist …We called for mobilisation of our entire forces. We called for united action, 1982 and 1983. It was necessary that we should meet this new offensive by the enemy as a united democratic force. Nothing else would help. I think our people responded remarkably to this call. The emergence of the UDF was exactly what we were talking about during the year of Unity in Action, 1982. It was what we envisaged in our call in 1983 for United Action. We had called for confrontation with the enemy on all fronts, by all our people in their various organisational formations. The response to this call was the emergence of the UDF.

> Question:…The regime says one of the reasons why it is taking action against the UDF leadership is that the UDF is a front of the ANC. Now if we say that the emergence of the UDF and present day mass upsurge is a result of organisation and mobilisation by the ANC, does it follow that the UDF is a creation of the ANC?

> Tambo: NO! NO! It does not follow, because the ANC has for a long time now, ever since it was banned, actually called on the people to organise themselves: any organisation, even where it differed with the ANC, provided only it was oriented against the apartheid system, we supported it. So we have encouraged the formation of organisations. These 700 organisations that belong to the UDF were not created by the ANC. But the ANC has called on the people to organise themselves, whether they organise themselves into ping-pong clubs or whatever it is, but we said, organise and direct your attention and activity to freeing yourselves so that you become human beings and citizens of your own country, which you are not! (Tambo 2003).

There is little doubt that members of the ANC underground played a role in UDF organisations and affiliates, but that is not the same as saying the ANC, whether from outside or in the underground, 'ran' the UDF. Yet a reality of

the time was that many members of UDF affiliates saw themselves as carrying out the mandates of the ANC. Every night many would tune in at 7 p.m. to listen to Radio Freedom (the ANC station broadcasting from a number of African states. See Interview, for example, with Pharepare [General] Mothupi, Polokwane 2004). Wherever possible they would obtain ANC and SACP literature. Of particular interest was the January 8 statement on the anniversary of the ANC. Here the organisation mapped out a general strategic vision and also specific 'tasks' for various sectors. It might read: 'to the students we say' and address students, suggesting in general terms what they felt were necessary political tasks in the year that lay ahead. Many activists in the UDF would pore over these words and extract meanings for what they should do in their specific sectors and organisations.

But the authors of the January 8 statements did not know the detailed conditions confronted in the various sectors and organisations, and in parts of the country facing distinct problems and possibilities. Consequently, the way this guideline or broad vision was interpreted remained in the hands of the affiliate. It was not ANC headquarters in Lusaka, nor UDF headquarters in Johannesburg that dictated how these 'instructions' or 'the line of march' was interpreted. And many a time the interpretation given on the ground was one that may well have surprised those who made the initial call for particular activities to be engaged in. For example, when the ANC leadership called for the building of elementary organs of people's power, they could not envisage the distinct issues and opportunities in the various parts of South Africa. The building of people's parks, or establishment of street committees, or involvement in various community mediation efforts was the result of initiatives of people on the ground. The local activists generally saw themselves carrying out ANC policy, but the details could only be worked out in the practical conditions faced in specific townships.

But the ANC knew the language that would mobilise people to do things, often better than the UDF leadership. In the mid 1980s, the UDF leadership wanted students to return to schools, shortly after the establishment of the Soweto Students' Crisis committee, which later helped initiate the national body, the NECC (National Education Crisis Committee). A delegation visited Lusaka to seek assistance. The ANC issued a statement exhorting the students to return, saying that the classrooms were their 'trenches'. They did return, albeit not on a long-term basis. One may regret the use of military terms, but that was the language that worked and the ANC had the skill in its communications to know what imagery would be effective with which constituencies.[10]

The UDF and its affiliates popularised the ANC, but it was not an invention of, or set up by, the ANC or a surrogate for the organisation. Govan Mbeki is

therefore not sufficiently accurate in his characterisation of the 1980s: '[T]he ANC had captured the political centre stage and *established its hegemony* through structures like the United Democratic Front…' (1996: x, my emphasis). Nor is he correct in referring to the mass uprising of the 1980s as 'directed and coordinated by the ANC underground…' (1996: xi. See also statement of former ANC spokesperson, Tom Sebina, and criticism in Neocosmos 1998: 203).[11] This is not to suggest that the ANC underground was unconnected to the legal struggle, something that is mystified in Seekings's work, repeatedly mentioned without explaining what significance it had (2000:56, 164). MK played a role, for example, in assisting stayaways on occasions by blowing up railway lines, thus making it difficult for those who wanted to go to work to do so. Hassim is not correct, in my view, in counterposing the civics 'political approach' to that of guerrilla warfare (Hassim 2003:48). Many MK interventions were attempts to complement civic grievances, for example, attacks on Bantu Administration buildings or in the case of the attack on the Soekmekaar police station—probably the first of such assaults, was directed against police who had been involved in forced removals (Interview Petros 'Shoes' Mashigo 2003; See also Seidman 2001). And underground propaganda units often issued pamphlets in support of specific community action.

Many underground activists played a role in UDF structures, but that is not the same as 'directing and coordinating' them. That would not have coexisted easily with the culture of UDF, where concepts of internal democracy made it difficult for a small group (which underground units were by definition) to direct an organisation. This is not an attempt to counterpose the democratic qualities of the UDF to inevitably less democratic qualities of the underground. But the different modes of operation and cultures of political work, made it impossible for so large a phenomenon to be directed and coordinated in the way Mbeki suggests. The underground may have had democratic goals, but its mode of organisation had, by definition, to be conspiratorial (see Suttner, unpub, 2004).

It may well be that various underground groups had great influence, just as other powerful personalities carried great weight, but all positions had to be won democratically. This, of course, applied less when there was extreme repression and when the states of emergency were in place. In that situation, internal democracy contracted and those who could adapt best to those conditions undoubtedly had greater influence. Also, practices occurred that were out of line with many of the fundamental tenets of the UDF. But this does not to establish anything about influence of the underground or ANC generally on the UDF. It is not clear who were best able to take advantage of whatever disarray state repression caused. Was it the ANC underground or

the 'comtsotsis' (a term used to describe gangsters, known as 'tsotsis', who posed as 'comrades')? It is not clear and may have varied from situation to situation. The relationship between ANC and UDF was complex, for while UDF was not a tool of the ANC, very many of its activists did see themselves as under ANC discipline. Obviously they interpreted this in a variety of ways. But they saw themselves as carrying out broad strategies of the ANC. This self-perception is one of the reasons why the UDF did not consider continuing after the unbanning of previously illegal organisations. There was a tendency on the part of the UDF to see itself as a 'curtain raiser' before the main team arrived on the field, a type of 'B-team mentality'. And it is probably the reality that most members of affiliates of the UDF did see themselves falling under the leadership of Lusaka.

But there were other options, such as the possible continuation of a coordinating body like the UDF enduring, parallel to the ANC, in order to link to a number of sectoral organisations. One of the reasons why this was not considered was that there was a sense that they should return to the 'changing rooms', to make way for the main team. They did not realise that in addition to what the 'A-team' may have done and could still do, *there was something specific that the period of the 1980s had brought into the political arena*. The UDF also coordinated organisations pursuing a wider range of activities than any political organisation could ever do. A political organisation concerns itself with politics, which, however broadly conceived, can never be so wide as to encompass all the activities of sectorally focused organisations.

The UDF saw its own intervention in a very modest light. In the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, Karl Marx remarks on the unwillingness of people who are doing something really new to see or depict it that way. He refers to the tendency to attribute inspiration to those who have gone before them, to dress what they are doing in the garb of those who preceded them:

> The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirit of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle-cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language… (Marx 1984:10).

From the outset, the UDF clothed itself in the Congress garb, especially of the 1950s, and indeed it was part of that tradition. It was part of the ANC in the broad sense. But a former UDF leadership figure, the Rev Frank Chikane (now an ANC leader and Director-General in the office of the President)

blurs the importance of the UDF, independent of the ANC connection, when he writes:

> Looking back, the UDF taught us all very profound lessons in leadership. In the first instance, the leadership of the UDF always saw themselves as the interim leaders of the movement in the context of the banning of the peoples' organisations and the imprisonment of our leaders. We saw ourselves very much as 'holding the fort' for the leadership in jail or in exile… The United Democratic Front was indeed a holding operation, albeit a very important one! (Chikane 2003).

While the UDF did hold the fort, it also represented something qualitatively new. The UDF recovered some of the legacy of the 1950s that had been ruptured in the repression of the 1960s, but it went beyond that. A whole generation had grown up without access to literature about the Congress movement. This is not to say that the memory was wiped out, but there was a rupture, organisationally, in terms of symbols and also the free and widespread diffusion of values. The UDF reconnected people to that tradition, but it also went beyond that and beyond anything that had been practised by leadership whether in exile or in prison. It was only people on the ground in the various arenas of struggle who had that opportunity. It does not reflect on the quality of leadership or organisation elsewhere to say that something new was being done which extended the horizons of the liberation movement.

Continuities and differences

The UDF did not constitute a total break with what came before it, nor with organised activity in other places and terrains of struggle. Continuities were there beyond what are recognised in much of the literature, which counterposes the UDF to both exile and the underground. The exile experience is generally characterised as having been top down, centralised, secretive and militaristic (see Daniel 2003; Good 2002). But this may have been more varied than is generally conceded and dependent on whether people were located in military or civilian structures. Also, the exile experience is said, unlike UDF, to have been unconducive to debate. Yet informants from the exile experience argue that debate and political discussion were the stuff of life in the camps (Pallo Jordan interview 2003). Even if valid, the existence of sites of debate and discussion is obviously not the same as suggesting that decision-making was generally 'bottom up'.

On the one hand, then, the exile experience to which UDF is counterposed may not have been sufficiently and accurately characterised. On the side of the UDF there are elements of romanticism and reluctance to acknowledge large degrees of continuity and similarity in elements of both experiences. In

the UDF, the range and boundaries of debate tended to expand and contract, according to security or perceived security considerations. But there was also a large measure of intolerance that coexisted with the broad democratic perspectives of the Front. Black Consciousness (BC) activists were often chased off platforms or beaten up and the Northern Transvaal UDF structures were also involved in the burning of 'witches' (cf Delius 1996; van Kessel 2000).

At an organisational and ideological level, there was also a degree of convergence. While exiled organisations may have operated according to democratic centralism, many UDF affiliates (for example, the Soweto Youth Congress) adopted similar guidelines. While people in exile learnt their ideology from Progress Publishers books emanating from Moscow (Serache interview 2002), these same texts circulated widely and were the basis for much political education inside the country. Many of these texts still circulate to this day.

In other respects, the 1980s does not stand on its own, isolated from experiences that went before or were contemporaneous. In particular, the 1976 uprising was a key factor in opening the space leading to the UDF experience. But also the impact of Robben Islanders was crucial in influencing many former BC leaders towards the 'Congress position' (cf. Seekings 2000:31 and interview with Nat Serache, 2002, regarding the role of assassinated former Robben Islander, Joe Gqabi). This was the case both in prison and from the ANC underground, which, contrary to the existing literature, was very much present after the arrest of the top leadership, who were sentenced in the Rivonia trial (see Buntman 2003 for prison accounts and Suttner unpub, 2004, on underground organisation). Indeed, many Robben Islanders came to play key roles within UDF, bridging gaps between generations, traditions and experiences.

Homogeneity and heterogeneity

The UDF always asserted that it was not itself a liberation movement and that the ANC performed that role. It nevertheless formed a part of, and articulated its role as an element of, the broad liberation forces headed by the ANC. This also meant acceptance of what one may describe as a specific 'national liberation model', whereby the national liberation movement is seen as the embodiment of the nation (see further, Suttner 2004). This may also be one of the reasons why the UDF saw its dissolution as inevitable with the arrival of the liberation movement. Acceptance of the 'national liberation model' also had consequences at the level of conceptions of pluralism, homogeneity and heterogeneity. It meant sharing a sense of the liberation movement as the nation, which was one and undivided.

When we assess the stance the UDF took towards various issues we need to put ourselves in the shoes of people active at the time. They faced the possibility or likelihood of arrest, torture, death and victimisation of their families. They faced an enemy that did everything to divide the South African people and black communities. Confronting this, the UDF raised a simple slogan that was the opposite of apartheid: 'UDF unites, apartheid divides'. This tallied with the ANC's notion of building a united, non-racial and non-sexist South Africa (although the latter adjective was then a recent inclusion, very unevenly assimilated). Asserting that unifying vision and notion of a common nationhood was, in a sense, revolutionary. Its realisation demanded the destruction of apartheid, dissolution of bantustans and the removal of a whole array of laws and practices.[12]

In line with this vision, there were strategies and tactics that promoted particular types of alliances, all aimed at uniting as wide a range of people behind a demand for an undivided South Africa, based on democratic values, and narrowing the base of the apartheid regime.[13] Understandable and commendable as this was, it also had limitations. The notion tended to neglect the presence of distinct identities within that unity and gloss over the problems associated with implementing non-racialism, the coexistence of different peoples and cultural groups and belief systems within that unity.

What space would be allowed for asserting difference? In the apartheid period, where difference was stressed by the regime, there was a tendency on the side of the liberation movement to underplay distinct identities. That is why, even today, where South Africa has a constitution that allows and encourages manifestation of a range of different identities, in particular, freedom of sexual orientation, practice within the society may well be lagging behind.

With regard to minority communities, there was a correct rejection by both ANC and UDF of the apartheid regime's insistence on 'group rights', which, in reality, meant minority group *privileges*. But this may have led to a failure to address anxieties of these communities, who feared for their legitimate *rights* as minority peoples. In this context, the dissolution of organisations like the Transvaal and Natal Indian Congresses may have been ill-advised or premature (see Suttner, unpub, 1990). Obviously such a statement—raising the possibility of 'uniracial organisations', may evoke outrage from those who conceive models of organisation in the abstract. Neville Alexander, for example, uses a definitional argument about 'race', which cancels out the implications of the lived reality of distinct communities (see his interview in Frederikse 1990:206). My statement is a practical one related to how best a community can be organised, given the fears and anxieties

it may have. If a community requires or desires specific organisation for itself, whether as Indians, Coloureds or whites, it must be considered. It does not necessarily entrench racial stereotypes. Indeed, such organisation may be part of the process of overcoming these.

Contextualising the conditions impacting on debate at the time

The conditions that impacted on the UDF activist self-identification with the ANC are not always factored into evaluations of the debates of the time. When we assess these debates we need to recall that many leaders and activists were trying to propagate ideas of illegal organisations without falling foul of the law. When Seekings (2000) speaks of the open propagation of Marxism, that applied to certain university lecturers but not to those known or suspected of being ANC members and Communists. These risked charges. They had to 'hold the line' but often without recourse to some arguments that could have strengthened their case. There was always a fear and reality of repression and a responsibility not to invite it through careless reference to illegal literature or organisations.

Activists and leaders saw themselves 'holding the line' for the ANC and did not want the regime to drive a wedge between themselves and Lusaka. In general, UDF activists were very cautious about negotiations and maintained a very rigid position. One would see on the back of T-shirts long statements about conditions set for talking—much longer and more onerous than anything set by Lusaka. UDF leaders felt they should take the lead from ANC and not show any wavering, which would allow the enemy to breach their ranks. One of the problems that arose in the post-1990 period is that people inside as well as in MK were not always adequately briefed about various shifts that had been made and took some time to accept that insurrection was no longer on the agenda, but had been displaced by talks.

This context—of fighting the regime—also impacted on the limits of debate. There was no search for truth in the abstract. In debating the Freedom Charter, for example, it was part of a battle for hegemony, asserting the primacy of a tradition. It was in a period where that tradition had been proscribed and was being re-established with frank partisanship, and in the face of hostility from both the left and right (whatever its strengths in terms of gathering of sources that had been neglected, this was obviously the case with Suttner and Cronin 1986). Obviously in that context what one said was not as balanced as it can be now, 20 years later, in a period of tranquillity, when the survival of a tradition is not as urgent or may be secure or, alternatively, endangered in a quite different way.

Connecting the UDF experience to that of the rest of the continent

In an important work, Michael Neocosmos connects the UDF experience to that of the rest of the continent. He draws on Mahmood Mamdani's thesis that the victory of liberation movements in Africa is based on the defeat of popular struggles (Mamdani 1990). Thus, the unbanning of the ANC is interpreted as replicating a pattern where various organs of popular power, representing popular nationalism, are disbanded or collapsed into the ANC. This is a prelude to the ANC representing itself as the repository of the nation. This is the displacement of popular nationalism by 'state nationalism'.

Neocosmos argues, correctly, that the various popular organisations which were affiliated to the UDF played both a sectoral and political role. The post-1990 period saw the dissolution of the UDF. Popular organisations were redefined as playing a sectoral role, leaving politics to the ANC (it has not worked out that way, as the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa (CONTRALESA) and some other organisations do engage in the political arena on various questions). Neocosmos (1998) sees this purported monopolisation of liberation politics by the ANC as a prelude to a specific statist conception of politics, where the nationalist organisation, soon to control the state, is seen as the vehicle for realising popular political aspirations. Organisations outside the ANC, while independent, are to give politics a wide berth, since that is taken care of by the ANC. There is a great deal to be said for the critique of statism, rejecting the idea that the state should deliver, with the masses being passive onlookers. I agree with Neocosmos that the masses should be decisive in driving processes, and that is something which has not yet been integrated into the democratic transition (I leave aside difficulties there may be in precisely determining modes of implementation).

It is not only an issue for organisations independent of the ANC but also a question of how the ANC relates to its own membership, how branches can have a vibrant role, when their organisation is the dominant factor in government. It relates to what role they play beyond periodic voting. The impression left in Neocosmos's (1998) work is that this is not a crucial question, while that of independent civil society organisations in opposition to the ANC's 'statist project' is. In reality, both are important and the internal character of the ANC is as important for democracy as the existence of viable organisations outside of the ANC and the state. The ANC is a quite different organisation from most or all others on the continent. Many of these are of relatively recent creation or limited lifespan. Consequently, the tradition of mass allegiance to the ANC over many generations and in many forms is

something specific that cannot be factored in as if it were something common to the rest of the continent.[14]

But a cult of anti-statism, which Neocosmos (1998) is in danger of falling into, may be as dangerous as 'state worship'. We do need a strong state in South Africa for transformative purposes and we can already see that whatever the deficiencies that have been identified by various writers, it is far from simply being a 'neoliberal' state. There is an uneasy coexistence in state interventions between conservative macroeconomic policies and extensive welfare projects. While these projects have many deficiencies in terms of reach and sustainability, the quality of many peoples' lives has however been transformed. With regard to the previous political role played by civil society organisations, we have seen and Neocosmos (1998) acknowledges that most of these organisations saw themselves 'as ANC' and that is why they were prepared to step back.

The central issue is not whether there is a division of labour between political organisations and social movements/organisations of civil society, but whether this division also encapsulates the type of democracy that the 1980s brought to the fore. That is not achieved nor denied by a division of labour in itself, but by looking at a variety of other factors. These include:

a   What characterises the democratic trajectory envisaged, is representative democracy the only mode of expression for the masses, and, if not, does it include various forms of participatory and popular activity, and, if so, how are these manifested? In my view popular involvement and activity may well be manifested inside the ANC. But this may also find expression in alliance with the ANC, but independent of the organisation, or also in opposition to the ANC and its allies. All of these are possibilities. The weakness of Neocosmos's (1998) approach is that the definition of the civics as having a sectoral sphere of operation is treated as *ipso facto* implying that South African democracy now entails a pure 'good governance'/representative democracy trajectory, to the exclusion of popular self-expression. That is how it has unfolded up till now. But that does not mean it is uncontested nor that the possibility for other forms of democracy are closed.

b   How does the ANC relate to organisations independent of its sway, or even in opposition to itself? The ANC and also the UDF, it should be recalled, are recent converts to pluralism. Consequently, both strands of liberation have tended to view organisations outside their fold as anti-democratic, the word 'democratic' being equated with the main bearer of the national democratic project, the ANC. It is important that the notion of pluralism becomes entrenched in its broadest meanings and understood as conducive to democratic consolidation. Not all interests can or should be represented by

the ANC. This is not to suggest, however, as many political scientists claim, that democratic consolidation requires the 'circulation of elites' in the foreseeable future, that is, that the potential defeat of the ANC in the short-term is a precondition for democracy to be firmly established in South Africa (see Suttner 2004b). This notion of democratic consolidation and pluralism needs to include a commitment to the viability of opposition political parties. This is something that many people in South Africa may shrink from because of the contempt they feel for the role of some of these parties. But the reality is that democratic consolidation depends on people voting for these parties rather than disrupting democracy. That is one of the uncomfortable truths that are necessary to accept (cf. Suttner 2004).

The character of South African democracy is not fixed in stone. Nothing has been finally decided. There has yet to be thorough analysis of the type of configuration of forces ranged behind or being assembled behind the ANC-led government. Under apartheid, the ruling bloc consisted of an alliance of classes, drawn from the white community and black collaborators, benefiting from apartheid. There is, thus far, no thorough analysis of the character of forces forming or being drawn into a new ruling bloc. Nor is there clarity regarding the weight each class or class fraction is carrying in decision-making and ultimately in the overall trajectory of South African democracy and transformation.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the UDF experience has left a legacy and meaning that is contested. It is a legacy that has been partially embraced in contemporary South Africa. It is one that has sometimes been romanticised or, alternatively, characterised as utopian (e.g. van Kessel 2000:274 regarding popular power). In many peoples' lives it was far from utopian for some period of time. Whether such practices can be permanently sustainable and popular power can coexist with representative democracy in a long-term relationship is unclear. There may not be any precedent internationally.

The chapter has also argued that the UDF experience, while connected to the ANC has elements that relate purely to local initiative, people acting on their own to deal with local problems and implementing popular power in relation to areas of their lives that mattered to them, but may well not have occurred to people in Lusaka or UDF Headquarters. The UDF period introduced some new elements into liberation discourse and experience. But it also contained extensive continuities and converged in its practice and thinking with much that was found in exile and other experiences.

Some important works in recent years have helped contextualise and explain the period and conditions leading to regional and local differences, manifestations of various types of people's power and abuse of power. Much of this writing helps account for factors that UDF leaders were not able to see nor study in the heat of the moment, in a period when decisions had to be made with the information that was at their disposal (see especially Seekings 2000; van Kessel 2000; Lodge and Nasson 1991; Cherry 1999; Neocosmos 1998; Marks 2001; Adler and Steinberg 2000). Apart from published works, there have been a number of theses, covering regional and local developments (see especially Cherry 2000). The period does deserve such investigation and further study, recording what happened, but going beyond that into the theoretical questions, in particular, the questions the UDF period raises for contemporary democracy. Cherry (2000) and Neocosmos (1998), make important beginnings with this theme.

Notes

1. The paper was written in 2003, the twentieth anniversary of the formation of the UDF. Although it has been revised, the spirit in which it was then written, responding to that date, is retained here. The chapter forms part of a wider body of research funded through the Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, Sweden.

2. At the same time it will be argued that there are large degrees of convergence between the UDF and the ANC in exile that have not been adequately acknowledged.

3. The Congress of the People adopted the Freedom Charter in 1955, following a broad campaign to elicit the grievances of ordinary people and their vision of a free South Africa (see Suttner and Cronin 1986).

4. Interestingly, the South African Communist Party (SACP), as part of its re-evaluation of Marxism following the collapse of Eastern European socialism, has adopted a slogan that departs from this position: 'Socialism is the future-build it now!'.

5. Michael Neocosmos, personal communication by e-mail, 18.08.2003 asks (in another context), however, whether top-down decisions necessarily preclude democratic possibilities, whether they may not under specific circumstances be an umbrella under which popular struggle develops.

6. The use of violence in this period was complex and related to a range of factors going beyond the question of apartheid and often connected to such issues as inter-generational tensions.

7. Africans were described in various ways at different phases of apartheid. In this period they were called 'Bantu' which literally means people and they were 'administered' through a specific department.

8. The term 'Congress movement' refers to organisations allied to the ANC.

9. The other pillars were international struggle, armed struggle and underground organisation.

10. For examples of the prevalence of military imagery, cf. Marks 2001, where youth

refer to themselves as members of 'detachments'.

11. Paradoxically the same inaccuracy is conveyed for different reasons (in wanting to convey the character of exile culture) by Sakhela Buhlungu when he writes of 'those in exile such as the late president of the ANC, Oliver Tambo, and the late Alfred Nzo who issued *commands* to underground structures and ANC-aligned structures of the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) as a whole' (2002:182, emphasis mine).

12. The 'bantustans' refer to the areas set aside for occupation by Africans, where they were supposed to realise their political aspirations, some of these areas having a fake independence conferred on them.

13. It should be noted that the UDF did not advance acceptance of the Freedom Charter as a precondition for affiliation. This was in the vain hope of attracting Black Consciousness adherents.

14. I have been warned that CODESRIA scholars resist ideas of South African 'exceptionalism', but am ready to deal with any 'fall out' from this statement.

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