

## Review Article

# *The UDF Period and its Meaning for Contemporary South Africa*

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Greg Houston, *The National Liberation Struggle in South Africa: A Case Study of the United Democratic Front, 1983–1987* (Brookfield, USA, Singapore and Sydney, Ashgate, 1999), xi + 299 pp., R195 paperback, ISBN 1 84014 955 8

Jeremy Seekings, *The UDF: A History of the United Democratic Front in South Africa 1983–1991* (Cape Town, David Philip; Oxford, James Currey; Athens, Ohio, Ohio University Press, 2000) xiii + 371 pp., R165 paperback, ISBN 0 86486 403 5 (David Philip); ISBN 0 85255 842 2 (James Currey); ISBN 0 8214 1336 8 (Ohio University Press).

Ineke van Kessel, *'Beyond Our Wildest Dreams': The United Democratic Front and the Transformation of South Africa* (Charlottesville and London, University Press of Virginia, 2000), xviii + 367 pp., R280.95 paperback, ISBN 0 8139 1868 5

Any retrospective discussion of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in the 21st century inevitably also relates to an assessment of post-apartheid South Africa and the character of the democracy that has been established or is in the process of being established in South Africa. In fact, most writers who intervened publicly on the UDF's twentieth anniversary last year consciously sought to counterpose the supposed qualities of the Front to those attributed to the African National Congress-dominated post-apartheid society.<sup>1</sup> There is a case to be made for such a comparison, provided we move away from the common tendency to romanticise the 1980s inside South Africa and demonise all that happened in exile.

The three books under consideration form part of a wider body of scholarship, which emerged in the 1980s and subsequently. Apart from Lodge's extended survey and Mufson's general and evocative reportage, most other works have been case studies of particular regions or communities.<sup>2</sup>

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1 See, for example, T. Mhlongo, 'Our Forgotten Heroes. SA's True Liberators Live in Poverty', *Sowetan Sunday World*, 9 March 2003; R. Fisher, 'UDF Showed US the Rainbow', *The Star*, 5 March 2003; and also K. Good, *The Liberal Model and Africa: Élités against Democracy* (Hampshire, Palgrave, 2002), for example, p. 161.

2 T. Lodge, 'Rebellion: The Turning of the Tide', in T. Lodge, B. Nasson and S. Mufson, K. Shubane and N. Sithole, *All, Here and Now: Black Politics in South Africa in the 1980s* (Cape Town, South Africa Update Series, Ford Foundation, David Philip, 1991), S. Mufson, *Fighting Years: Black Resistance and the Struggle for a New South Africa* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1990). See also M. Murray, *South Africa: Time of Agony, Time of Destiny* (London, Verso, 1987). There have subsequently been some important theses, notably that of J. Cherry, 'Kwazakele. The Politics of Transition in South Africa: An Eastern Cape Case Study' (PhD thesis, Rhodes University, 2000).

Of the three, Seekings's is the most thorough examination of the UDF, but it focuses primarily on the national level, and on institutional structures, mainly at a leadership level. It does not attempt much in the way of theorisation, although several of its evaluations are obviously based on theoretical assumptions. Given its tendency to focus on the top, however, Seekings's study tends to lose something of the flavour of activities at the level where most UDF activity occurred. Indeed, since the UDF, in practice, was operating simultaneously at both of these levels and especially in times of repression, much more at the local than at the national level; there is an artificiality to an enquiry that separates and excludes serious consideration of the local. It also leads to an over-emphasis on the significance of the character, social background and influence of individuals in the national leadership, and a failure to appreciate the inventiveness of affiliates.

Van Kessel, in contrast, presents three case studies – the UDF youth structures in the Northern Transvaal, the Kagiso civic organisation on the West Rand, and the *Grassroots* newspaper in Cape Town. This approach has the value of showing the diversity of affiliates and the complexity of the problems that arose in organising and unifying the Front. Many of the issues that arise in Van Kessel's work – questions of identity, the intersection of belief systems and generational conflicts – were largely neglected in earlier studies and certainly by the UDF itself.

The only one of these three studies that attempts to treat the UDF at a theoretical level is that of Houston, although the theorisation is enunciated before the evidence and the effort to link the two is not particularly convincing. He argues that the activities of the UDF fulfilled what he terms 'Leninist/Gramscian' perspectives. The equation of the two perspectives is itself problematic, but the use of this overarching notion at the outset tends to obscure some of the agency of people on the ground. Grassroots activities did sometimes conform to particular conceptions of either or both Gramsci and Lenin but were more often manifestations of creativity which do not easily fit into their theoretical paradigms, contested as these often are.

While Houston correctly shows that the 1980s evinced elements of Gramsci's 'war of position', this coexisted with an insurrectionary position – a 'war of movement', which does not always seem to feature in his theorisation. Also, there is a puzzling suggestion that the UDF became a political party (p. 3) – and more than this, that it was transformed into a 'vanguard party'. Houston notes how state repression and counter-mobilisation led to the 'destruction of local affiliates', which in turn forced many UDF activists underground. These changes, he argues, brought to an end the period of resistance which corresponded to the Leninist/Gramscian model of revolutionary strategy and tactics. Instead, the UDF became a Leninist vanguard party, with its affiliate membership operating largely underground (p. 7).

This is hardly credible when measured against the evidence and the actual writings of Lenin and Gramsci. If a vanguard party were formed, that surely would have been compatible with Leninist approaches, although the existence of a vanguard could not have encompassed the sprawling and variegated UDF as a whole. Nevertheless, the suggestion that the UDF was transformed in this way is not substantiated through the data presented. Who comprised the vanguard and what did such a vanguard party do? How did it relate to the African National Congress (ANC) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) underground, and insofar as these organisations played a 'vanguard' role, how did they coexist with another vanguard party? None of this is adequately explored by Houston.

The Seekings book, while much stronger in terms of substantiating conclusions, also suffers from the superimposition of categories, in this case 'either/or categories'. These include a supposed tension between those who favoured 'organisation' as opposed to

'confrontation' or 'insurrection' (pp. 6–7). My own understanding, in contrast, is that many UDF people favoured both approaches. One could not exclude the possibility of insurrection. But it is a misplaced counterposition because one could not successfully confront a repressive government without organisation.

Likewise, Seekings continually speaks of a tension over a discourse of rights versus a discourse of liberation, with one or the other being dominant amongst different sectors of the Front and within the Front as a whole at different times (p. 7). But wasn't the struggle for liberation a precondition for the realisation of rights? The struggle for liberation brought democracy for the first time. There is a complementarity rather than a contradiction between liberation and rights, which is not to suggest that the consonance is inevitably sustained.

Seekings argues this distinction mainly in relation to the different responses of UDF affiliates in the African areas (favouring liberation) and the minority areas (favouring rights). I am willing to concede that this may be one of the clues as to why Coloured and Indian people appeared (or mistakenly appeared to UDF activists) to favour the UDF during the 1980s, but ended up voting for the National Party (now the New National Party or NNP). Did this relate to their previously enjoying more rights than Africans and a fear that liberation would mean rights for Africans at their expense? Seekings's insightful raising of the rights/liberation distinction clearly deserves further discussion.

Seekings also speaks of a contradiction between those seeking confrontation and those emphasising broad alliances. Might it not, however, be argued that when the UDF felt strong enough to confront the state it was the very breadth of its alliances that made this viable?

In Van Kessel's account, the UDF comes alive, for it was through the disparate experiences in affiliates that the people lived the UDF. Moreover, as her accounts show, the UDF experience often turned out quite differently from the hopes and expectations of strategists in Lusaka or at the Johannesburg UDF headquarters. In all three of her case studies, Van Kessel is at pains to stress the salience of generational conflicts and tensions. There is also an awareness of the intersection of different belief systems (see, for example, pp. 120–121 and p. 132). These were crucial issues that were not given thorough attention by the UDF or the ANC at the time. There is still a failure to acknowledge the 'baggage' people brought with them when they entered political organisations, and it is a mistake to treat joining a liberation movement as a form of reincarnation, where all of one's previous life is no longer of significance.<sup>3</sup>

Both Seekings and Van Kessel refer to divisions within the UDF concerning an alleged Indian-dominated 'cabal', variously said to control resources and impose decisions on structures. Seekings provides some sociological evidence as to why the Indian Congress was dominant in Natal in the early years of the Front. One would have wanted to see this analysis developed further. Instead, both books leave this question at the level of unsubstantiated gossip. There could have been further exploration of conditions under which these allegations emerged and the extent to which they might have reflected ideological differences. Is the allegation of control sustainable? Was it possible for any one group or 'cabal' to exercise such control? Perhaps the allegations tended to come from more 'Africanist' elements and, if so, the precise meaning of that political orientation requires analysis. One also needs to investigate the ideological leanings of those alleged to be part of the 'cabal'. It may be that many of these were left leaning or Marxists. If so, what significance did that

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3 See, for example, B. Turok, *Nothing But The Truth* (Jeppesstown, Jonathan Ball, 2003), Chapter 1, and discussion in R. Suttner 'Being a Revolutionary: Reincarnation or Carrying Over Previous Identities? A Review Article', *Social Identities*, 10 (2004), pp. 415–431.

have, in particular, for strategies pursued by the Front? Finally, the treatment would have been strengthened had the allegations been located in the underground conditions of the time when normal processes of consultation could not take place.

## **The UDF and Continuing Hegemonic Struggles**

The emergence of the UDF as a powerful umbrella body of organisations was itself a product of struggles that saw the 'Congress-aligned' organisations achieve dominance over those aligned to the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). This was a complex process, but by the early 1980s the organisational presence of the BCM was restricted to a handful of small organisations (as opposed to its broader cultural and ideological influence within the ANC and other organisations that remains to this day).

This dominance of the Congress tradition, manifested in the UDF and its affiliates, is partly explained in Seekings's discussion in Chapter Two of his book. Much of the existing resistance historiography treats the ANC as dead after Rivonia.<sup>4</sup> In fact, many ANC people were not arrested in that period and others were periodically released from prison. Many of them set about establishing underground structures.<sup>5</sup> The absence of acknowledgement of this factor in most of the existing studies has led the pre-1976 period to be treated as one dominated by black consciousness (BC), and the subsequent emergence of Congress hegemony is consequently left unexplained. This tendency is largely reproduced in all three of the books reviewed here, although Seekings does refer in a limited way to the role of certain underground figures during this period.

In reality, the period from the late 1960s until 1976 was one of contestation as well as co-operation between the BCM and Congress forces, the latter found in the main in the underground. There was a substantial amount of contact between these two bodies of organisation, certainly in Natal and Johannesburg. Many BC figures, such as Barney Pityana, had extensive contact with, or were simultaneously in, ANC structures, while some leading ANC figures, such as Joe Gqabi (as documented by Seekings) and the current Deputy President, Jacob Zuma in Natal, influenced pre-1976 politics.<sup>6</sup>

## **The UDF Contribution towards Democratic Thinking: 'Prefigurative Democracy' and 'Transfer of Power'**

None of the contributions to the debate reviewed here pays sufficient attention or even acknowledges the contribution made by the UDF to how democracy was to be understood

4 Houston follows this characterisation, referring to an 'organisational vacuum' that was partly filled by the Black Consciousness movement during the 1970s. See Houston, *The National Liberation Struggle*, p. 1. Also, see Seekings, *The UDF*, p. 5. This position is challenged in R. Suttner, 'It is Your Mother Who is the Enemy Now!'" An account of the imprint of African National Congress [ANC] underground activity in the "lull" after Rivonia' (unpublished paper, presented at Interdisciplinary Seminar, Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER), 8 September 2003). [Available at <http://wiserweb.wits.ac.za/PDF%/20Files/wirs/%20Suttner.PDF>]

5 F. L. Buntman, *Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 153ff and Suttner 'It is Your Mother', pp. 19–23.

6 Interview with N. Barney Pityana, Pretoria, 9 August 2003; Interview with Ralph Mjijima, Johannesburg 15 July 2003; and Interview with Nat Serache, Johannesburg, 31 August 2002. Also, see Suttner, 'It is Your Mother', pp. 17–18, 20–23, 33–34. The interviews cited in this article were all conducted by the author. They fall into two categories: those from the mid-1980s and those undertaken since 2001. The tapes of the interviews from the 1980s were mislaid when the author was detained in 1986. There are transcripts of some of these interviews and a number have been quoted in unpublished papers. While the place of the interviews is known, it has not always been possible to provide precise dates of the interviews. The earlier interviews were conducted with individuals who were accessible to the author and whose experiences cast light on the question of popular power. Interviews conducted since 2001, along with the transcripts, are in the author's possession.

and practised in South Africa. The 1980s introduced modes of practising politics that previously had never been seen in South Africa, and that continue to condition many people's expectations today.<sup>7</sup> Notions of 'popular democracy', 'people's power', 'self-empowerment', 'the masses driving the process', 'democracy from below', 'creativity of the masses' were all introduced as new ideas and practices into South African politics.<sup>8</sup>

There were abuses of various kinds in the period of people's power, but there were nevertheless important reinterpretations and new notions introduced into South African democratic discourse. People's power constituted, in part, a new meaning and deepening of the interpretation of the Freedom Charter.<sup>9</sup> In many ways this was self-consciously the case, with activists saying that what they were doing in the street committees or other organs of people's power, was to implement the first clause of the Freedom Charter: that the 'The People Shall Govern!'.<sup>10</sup>

In my view, the period of the UDF represented a notion of 'prefigurative democracy'. Democracy was not understood as being inaugurated on a particular day, after which all the practices and ideals that were cherished would come into effect. People saw what they were doing in their daily practices as part of the process of building the 'new South Africa'. Means and ends became fused; the democratic means were part of democratic ends. In fact, what was being done at that moment was seen as valuable in itself and not merely in an instrumental sense, contributing towards a distant goal when the (problematic) notion of transfer of power to the people would occur.

Leading UDF figure, Murphy Morobe elaborated:

[A] democratic South Africa is one of the aims or goals of our struggle. ... democracy is the means by which we conduct the struggle. ... 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. ... The creation of a democratic South Africa can only become a reality with the participation of millions of South Africans in the process – a process which has already begun in the townships, factories and schools of our land. ... 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.<sup>11</sup>

While many activists and leaders were involved in insurrectionary activity, the notion of politics in their perspective did not sit easily with a focus on a decisive moment of seizure or transfer of power. The problem with the notion of a 'transfer of power' to the people lies partly in its implication 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.<sup>12</sup> This conception tends to devalue immediate activity, whose relevance is understood purely in relation to realising something else – the seizure or transfer of

7 See J. Chery, 'Traditions and Transitions. African Political Participation in Port Elizabeth', in J. Hyslop (ed.), *African Democracy in the Era of Globalisation* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 1999), p. 404.

8 See M. Morobe, 'Towards a People's Democracy: The UDF View', *Review of African Political Economy*, 40, 1 (1987), pp. 81–95; M. Neocosmos, 'From People's Politics to State Politics: Aspects of National Liberation in South Africa', in A. O. Olukoshi (ed.), *The Politics of Opposition in South Africa* (Uppsala, Nordic Africa Institute, 1998), pp. 195–241.

9 See discussion in Morobe, 'Towards a People's Democracy'.

10 Interview with Weza Made, Johannesburg, early 1986. Made was a Uitenhage activist (transcript in author's possession).

11 Morobe, pp. 81–82. See also, Mosioua 'Terror' Lekota in A. W. Marx, *Lessons of Struggle: South African Internal Opposition, 1960–1990* (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 124, citing 'correspondence with author, April 1988' (p. 297, note 50).

12 N. Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism* (London, Verso Books, [1978] 2000), pp. 257–258.

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.<sup>13</sup>

The UDF envisaged building elements of people's power immediately, thus transforming relationships between the powerful and the powerless even before the moment of 'taking state power' when the people would ultimately govern themselves through control of the central state. While not self-consciously challenging perspectives of the ANC and SACP – in practice the UDF implied something different from them. People understood what they were doing in the 1980s as a moment of self-empowerment. They did not wait for leaders to tell them what to do, but directly exercised their democratic rights in their political practices. This is borne out by much of the data presented in Van Kessel's book, although she does not draw the same theoretical conclusions advanced here. However, there was also a strong sense of hierarchy, which meant there was never any idea of a conscious challenge to leadership. Nevertheless, 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, they 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 uprising of the 1950s and there are, no doubt, other examples that can be found.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> Van Kessel also reports that people in the former Northern Transvaal depicted themselves as implementing the M-Plan in 1986, although it is unclear whether this understanding derived from general organisational memory of the plan, or from specific methods of operation in the Northern Transvaal (p. 135). Moreover, the UDF appropriation of the tradition of the 1950s did not always take account of (or was not fully aware of) its contradictory character. Thus, the M-Plan also envisaged a strong element of top-down transmission of leadership decisions.<sup>16</sup> By contrast, the People's Power period was, on the whole, a 'bottom-up' experience and the notions informing it, theoretically, came primarily from the grassroots upwards.<sup>17</sup>

The power and promise of the UDF period had moments of great creativity and democratic involvement alongside moments of abuse, with 'kangaroo courts' and intolerance of diversity.<sup>18</sup> What is important is to identify, insofar as we can, what conditions were

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13 Much of Lenin's writings focus on this 'decisive moment' and the literature of the ANC and SACP and the thinking of many other liberation movements in Africa developed within a similar ideological environment.

14 G. Mbeki, *South Africa. The Peasants' Revolt* (London, International Defence and Aid Fund, [1964] 1984), p. 125.

15 See Cherry, 'Traditions and Transitions', pp. 403–404. The M-Plan was developed by the ANC after the Communist Party was declared illegal, in the expectation of its being proscribed. It was a preparation for ANC underground organisation. R. Suttner, 'The African National Congress (ANC) Underground: From the M-Plan to Rivonia', *South African Historical Journal*, 49 (November 2003), pp. 123–146.

16 Suttner, 'The African National Congress (ANC) Underground', pp. 132–134.

17 Michael Neocosmos, personal e-mail communication, 18 August 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.

18 See Van Kessel, "*Beyond our Wildest Dreams*", p. 106 and p. 107, for examples from the Northern Transvaal.

most conducive to success, meaning popular democracy without abuse, intolerance and violence, and what conditions were most likely to result in the negative features. This must be related to a periodisation of the UDF experience. Moments of successful popular power may well have depended on the intensity of state repression. The lower the intensity, the greater the likelihood for the successful exercise of popular power. The period of the state of emergency saw the arrest of almost all the most experienced leaders. As a result, in many communities, the youth took command, leading to the greater mobilisation of violence and a decline in broad community involvement.<sup>19</sup> People's power was generally 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 and did degenerate into violence and abuse when only particular sections of the community, who were able to exact punishments, took command. When there was greater community involvement, mediation tended to take precedence over coercion.<sup>20</sup>

The UDF period saw some examples – in Port Alfred, for instance – where widely representative community elements took control of important aspects of township life. The fleeing of government officials left a vacuum, which the civic structures filled. The Bantu Administration building was taken over and turned into a much-needed crèche. The same period saw extensive community action, including consumer boycotts enforced with little resort to violence.<sup>21</sup> In Atteridgeville, Uitenhage, Fort Beaufort, Port Elizabeth, Graaff-Reinet, and at times in Mamelodi and Alexandra township, community efforts at crime control at street and block level involved communities as a whole and these activities were regarded as fulfilling a necessary social goal.<sup>22</sup> However, 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 often downplayed the need to patiently build structures) or even for criminal elements to take control. This frequently led to extensive violence and the degeneration of popular institutions into vehicles of terror. Unfortunately, none of the three books provides an adequate sense of causality or the connection between abuse and the presence or absence of established organisational structures.

### **The UDF as an Agent of the ANC as well as an Autonomous Actor**

The important and intractable issue of the relationship between the ANC and the UDF is addressed, to varying degrees, by all three books under review. Some statements of ANC figures suggest that the ANC 'set up' the UDF or directed it, much as the apartheid state alleged. This issue particularly preoccupies Seekings, but he does not appear to achieve clarity. The ANC had for some years wanted the development of mass organisation – to advance the broad vision of the Congress movement – within the country, and to secure leadership of it.<sup>23</sup> The establishment of a broad front of popular organisations corresponded in many respects with what the ANC regarded as necessary to remedy its organisational

19 See Neocosmos, 'From People's Politics to State Politics', pp.202–210, in which the author attempts to periodise the UDF experience by identifying these different phases of popular involvement.

20 Interviews with Titus Mafolo, Atteridgeville; Weza Made, Uitenhage; and Gugile Nkwinti, Port Alfred – all conducted in Johannesburg, 1986.

21 Interview Gugile Nkwinti, Johannesburg, 1986. See also Mufson, *Fighting Years*, pp. 106ff.

22 Interviews – Titus Mafolo and Mapheti Leeuw regarding Atteridgeville; Weza Made regarding Uitenhage; and Paul Mashatile regarding Alexandra Township – Johannesburg, 1986.

23 African National Congress, 'The Green Book. Report of the Politico-Military Strategy Commission to the ANC National Executive Committee, August 1979'. [<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/mk/green-book.html>]

deficiencies on the ground.<sup>24</sup> But that does not mean that the ANC set up the organisation, nor that it controlled the UDF and its affiliates.<sup>25</sup> 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 that the ANC ‘ran’ the UDF.

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.<sup>26</sup> Wherever possible they would obtain ANC and SACP literature. Of particular interest was the annual January 8 statement on the anniversary of the formation of the ANC, where the organisation mapped out a general strategic vision as well as outlining specific political ‘tasks’ for the different ‘sectors’ in the year ahead. Many activists in the UDF would study these words carefully. However, the authors of the January 8 statements often had a limited grasp of the range of specific conditions, problems and possibilities confronting these mass organisations in different parts of the country. Consequently, the way in which this broad vision was interpreted remained in the hands of the local affiliates. It was not ANC headquarters in Lusaka, or UDF headquarters in Johannesburg that dictated how these ‘instructions’ or ‘the line of march’ were interpreted. Frequently, the interpretation given on the ground was one that may well have surprised those who made the initial call for engagement in particular activities. For example, when the ANC leadership called for the building of elementary organs of people’s power, they could not anticipate precisely how different communities would respond. The building of people’s parks, or the establishment of street committees, or the promotion of various community mediation efforts were the result of grassroots initiatives. While local activists generally saw themselves as carrying out ANC policy, the details could only be worked out in the practical conditions faced in specific townships.

Despite that, the ANC often knew better than the UDF leadership what language would galvanise people. It was sometimes militaristic, as when the ANC called on students to return to school, because these were their ‘trenches’ – that was the imagery that was effective with certain constituencies in the conditions of the time.<sup>27</sup>

The UDF and its affiliates popularised the ANC, but it was not an invention of the ANC or its surrogate, as Govan Mbeki suggested.<sup>28</sup> Nor was the mass uprising of the 1980s ‘directed and co-ordinated by the ANC underground...’.<sup>29</sup> This is not to suggest that the ANC underground was unconnected with the legal struggle, a relationship that is mystified in Seekings’s work, which repeatedly mentions it without explaining its significance (for example, see p. 56 and p. 164). The armed wing of the ANC, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), played a role – for example, it assisted stayaways, on occasion, by blowing up railway lines, thus making it difficult for those who wanted to go to work to do so. Shireen Hassim is not correct, in my view, in counterposing the civics ‘political approach’ to that of guerrilla warfare.<sup>30</sup> Many MK interventions such as attacks on Bantu Administration buildings were attempts to complement civic grievances. The attacks on the Soekmekaar and Orlando police stations can also be viewed in this light. The former was directed

24 H. Barrell, ‘The Turn to the Masses: The African National Congress’s Strategic Review of 1978–79’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18, 1 (1992), pp. 64–92.

25 O. Tambo, ‘Interview’, *Mayibuye*, 10 and 11 (1984). Reprinted in *Umrabulo*, 2003. [<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/pubs/umrabulo19/umrabulo.html>]

26 See, for example, Interview with Pharepare [General] Mothupi, Polokwane, 28 January 2004.

27 For the prevalence of military imagery, see M. Marks, *Young Warriors. Youth Politics, Identity and Violence in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press, 2001), p. vii. Youth structures were often referred to by youth themselves as ‘detachments’.

28 *Sunset at Midday. Latshon’ilang’emini!* (Braamfontein, Nolwazi Educational Publishers, 1996), p. x.

29 *Sunset at Midday*, p. xi.

30 S. Hassim, ‘The Limits of Popular Democracy: Women’s Organisations, Feminism and the UDF’, *Transformation*, 51 (2003), p. 48.



against police who had been involved in forced removals, while the latter was directed against a force notorious for perpetrating violence against Soweto residents.<sup>31</sup> Underground propaganda units often issued pamphlets in support of specific community actions. However, the underground activists 'directing and co-ordinating' UDF structures are something that would not have coexisted easily with the democratic culture of the UDF. It would have been difficult for small groups (which underground units were by definition) to direct the organisation. So large a phenomenon could not be directed and co-ordinated in the way that Mbeki suggests and Seekings sometimes implies.

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 those situations, internal democracy took a knock and those who could adapt best to such conditions undoubtedly had greater influence. Also, under state of emergency conditions, practices occurred that were out of line with many of the fundamental tenets of the UDF. Accountability was difficult to sustain and, where attempts were made to do so, activists in semi-underground conditions had their security compromised. In the Northern Transvaal, for example, when the UDF treasury insisted on receipts for purchases, itinerant activists accumulated an array of paper documentation. On being arrested, they claimed to have only visited Tzaneen. But the close scrutiny of this paper-trail made it possible for the police to confront the prisoners with an alternative map of their travels. This is an interesting illustration of the problematic coexistence of different modes of operation in the same organisation.<sup>32</sup>

This period was characterised by extensive violence and intolerance, which was difficult for leaders to restrain because most were either in hiding or in detention. In these conditions, the ideological hegemony of the UDF often became less a question of persuasion than coercion. But this does not establish anything about the influence of the underground or ANC generally on the UDF. Who knows who was best able to take advantage of whatever disarray state repression caused? Was it the ANC underground or the *comtsothis* (a term used to describe gangsters who posed as 'comrades')? It is not clear and may have varied from situation to situation, which is why the detailed, local case-study approach adopted by Van Kessel has advantages.

The self-perception of UDF affiliates, seeing themselves as being under ANC discipline and carrying out its strategies, is one of the reasons why the UDF did not consider continuing to exist after the unbanning of the ANC and SACP. 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. Yet there could have been other options. A co-ordinating body such as the UDF could have continued to exist, parallel to the ANC, in order to link it to a number of sectoral organisations. One of the reasons why this was not considered was the sense that the UDF should return to the 'changing rooms' and make way for the main team. The UDF 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 co-ordinated organisations pursuing a wider range of activities than any political organisation could ever manage. A political organisation concerns itself with politics, which however broadly conceived, can never be so wide as to cover all the activities of organisations established on a sectoral basis. It is conceivable that

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31 Interviews with Petros 'Shoes' Mashigo on the Soekmekaar' attack (Pretoria, 12 April 2003), and with Solly Shoke on the Orlando attack (Johannesburg, 20 September 2003).

32 Interview with France Mohlala (Polokwane, 29 January 2004).

the UDF could have continued to play this broad sectoral role, simultaneously with the ANC's contesting power and then governing the state.

The leadership and many of the UDF affiliates saw the organisation's intervention in a very modest light. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx remarks on the unwillingness of people who are doing something really new to see it or depict it in that way; there is a tendency to attribute inspiration to those who have gone before; to dress what they are doing in the garb of those who preceded them.<sup>33</sup> From the outset, the UDF clothed itself in the garb of Congress, especially the garb of the 1950s, and indeed it was part of that tradition, part of the ANC in the broad sense. However, the Rev. Frank Chikane blurs the importance of the UDF, independent of the ANC connection, when he writes of the UDF as merely 'holding the fort' for the leadership in jail or in exile.<sup>34</sup> This view, articulated by some key figures in the ANC, may understandably – but in my view erroneously – have influenced the conclusions of the authors under review.

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 in 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 the 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.*

This sense of the UDF is captured particularly well in Van Kessel's work, although writers such as Mufson also creatively engage with these dimensions of the Front. Van Kessel is sceptical of people's power and stresses its utopianism. Whether the scepticism is valid depends on what goals are attributed to the organs of the Front. While many may have had utopian ideas, most of the individuals and affiliates that I have researched or interviewed had limited and practical goals, relating to people's everyday concerns.

## 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 those recognised in much of the literature, which counterposes the UDF to those in exile and underground. The exile experience is generally characterised as having been top down, centralised, secretive and militaristic.<sup>35</sup> However, this may have been more varied than is generally conceded, and dependent on whether people were located in military or civilian structures. Exiles often argue that debate and political discussion was the stuff of life in the camps,<sup>36</sup> but the existence of sites of debate and discussion is obviously not the same as suggesting that decision-making was generally 'bottom up'. The UDF, in contrast, is often romanticised and there is a reluctance to acknowledge large degrees of continuity and similarity in elements of both experiences. In the UDF, the range and boundaries of debate

33 K. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (London, Lawrence and Wishart, [1869] 1984), p. 10.

34 Rev. F. Chikane, 'The Origins and Significance of the United Democratic Front (UDF)', in the ANC journal, *Umrabulo* (June 2003). [<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/pubs/umrabulo/umrabulo19/umrabulo.html>]

35 See, for example, J. Daniel, 'The Mbeki Presidency: Lusaka Wins', *South African Yearbook of International Affairs*, 2003, reprinted on [www.hsrc.ac.za](http://www.hsrc.ac.za); and Good, *The Liberal Model*, pp. 93–96, 180, and 193.

36 Interview with Pallo Jordan, Cape Town, 20 February 2003.

tended to expand and contract, according to security or perceived security considerations. There was also a large measure of intolerance that coexisted with its broad democratic perspectives. Black consciousness activists were often chased off platforms or beaten up, and the Northern Transvaal UDF youth structures were also involved in the burning of 'witches' and many other manifestations of intolerance and the denial of pluralism.<sup>37</sup>

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 (the Soweto Youth Congress, for example) adopted similar guidelines. While people in exile learnt their ideology from books emanating from Progress Publishers in Moscow<sup>38</sup> – these same texts circulated widely and were the basis for much political education inside the country. The works under review add to our understanding, but my belief is that they constitute just the beginning and that further work needs to be done towards characterising the period, theorising the experience and locating it as a specific contribution to democratic struggle.

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37 See P. Delius, *A Lion Amongst the Cattle: Reconstruction and Resistance in the Northern Transvaal* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1996), chapter 6; Van Kessel, "Beyond our Wildest Dreams", pp. 106 and 107; Cherry, 'Traditions and Transitions', p. 410; and Mufson, *Fighting Years*, p. 119. There is a belief amongst former UDF leaders in the Northern Transvaal that the police murder of the regional president, Peter Nchabaleng was a result of his taking steps to stop the burnings and that the police may have even have instigated them. See Interview with France Mohlala, Polokwane, 29 January 2004.

38 Interview with Nat Serache, Johannesburg, 31 August 2002.

